

sojourners



Sept-Oct 2017 | Faith in Action for Social Justice

Clash of Liberties

When religious freedom conflicts
with civil rights, can both win?

PLUS:

**The paradoxes
of Mother Teresa**

**Keystone:
The fight continues**

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'Community' for profit**





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THE WORLD NEEDS EVERYDAY PEACEMAKERS

Into a world divided by conflict, followers of Jesus have been commissioned as everyday peacemakers. But do we know what it means to be makers of peace? Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart offer a theologically compelling, richly personal, and intensely practical set of tools that equips us to join God in the restoration of broken relationships, unjust systems, and global conflicts.

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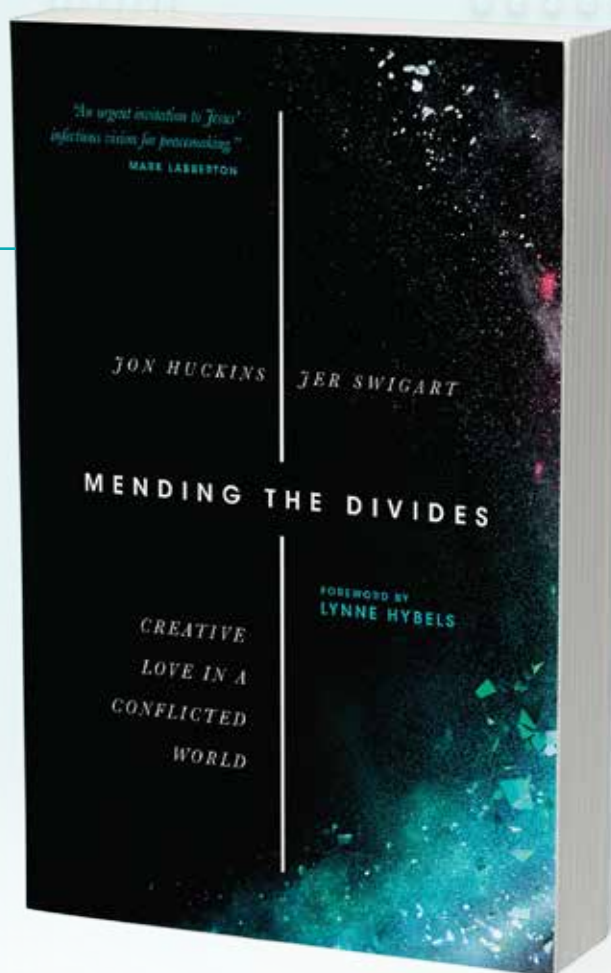
"At a time when conflict is so easy to instigate and arguments are so easily had, [Huckins and Swigart] point to the better way of peace that reflects the power of a broken and resurrected Christ. What would it look like for the church to take seriously its call to bring about peace in a broken and hurting world? This book provides the way!"

JENNY YANG,

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JON HUCKINS

is a pastor and cofounding director of The Global Immersion Project. He is a regular speaker, and his most recent book is *Thin Places: Six Postures for Creating and Practicing Missional Communities*.



JER SWIGART

is a church planter, peacemaker, professor, and cofounder of The Global Immersion Project. He is a sought-after thought leader, consultant, speaker, and writer.



IN THE TERM that begins this fall, the Supreme Court will hear the case of *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. The nine justices will decide: Is a baker with sincerely held religious objections to same-sex marriage obliged—by anti-discrimination laws—to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple?

But underneath the frosting, the case exemplifies a much broader conversation in which religious liberty is pitted against civil liberties. In this ongoing fight, sides are often split down partisan lines, with conservatives championing religious liberty and liberals defending civil rights.

This religious-freedom-vs.-civil-liberties

split is frustrating to many. After all, religious liberty isn't just for conservatives; the First Amendment offers important protections to all people of faith, from Muslims who seek permits to build mosques to Christians who are conscientious objectors to war. At the same time, we care deeply about civil rights, especially in an era when so many Americans face discrimination because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. In a nutshell, we want to support religious freedom for all while also protecting the civil liberties of LGBTQ

folks and other minorities. But is that even possible?

Baptist minister and constitutional lawyer Oliver Thomas

is optimistic, but not naive. In “Clash of Liberties,” he explains how religious liberty laws morphed from bipartisan efforts to ensure religious liberty for all into tools used by conservatives and liberals alike to press their own advantage. If we're serious about protecting both, Thomas writes, we're going to have to do something that's easier said than done: lay aside our ideological differences and work for the common good. ■

Letters

Hipster Privilege

D.L. Mayfield's article (“Church Planting and Gentrification,” July 2017) hit home and is an important conversation. Out of economic necessity after a bout of homelessness, I moved into a neighborhood jokingly referred to as “meth alley” by the uptown people. Our neighborhood health statistics were dismal because of poor access to anything resembling fresh food. When we became the object of “saving” by some churches from the other side of town that wanted to be missional, they didn't ask us what we needed. We became the project of outreach by young, white, educated, privileged religionists intoxicated by their specialness. The exuberant youths were quite clueless that we had some wisdom about what our neighborhood could use. Most were from two local Bible colleges and had grand ideas about urban outreach.

They planned a hipster coffee shop that the evangelical whites with privilege would use as a base of operation, providing tutoring to our youth. They believed they would open their doors to the unfortunate of my dismal neighborhood and we would come flooding in to be saved by their great goodness from our great need.

I just wanted to recover and get a job. What my saviors failed to see without exception were my strengths—my resilience, the

I didn't have the gas money to get to church.

gifts I wanted to bring to my community, and my long experience with making do in the most hostile of circumstances. They could have asked, and I would have told them patiently, but they weren't listening because they knew all there was to know about poverty and how to fix it.

I didn't have the gas money to get to church; they were going to Hawaii for a break from us.

My suggestion: If any church or Bible college wants to be missional, ask the community what they most need. Ask who the community leaders already are and help them! Jobs and microloans to small neighborhood businesses are a place to start. Transportation opportunities to those jobs and access to good food are tangible helps. Without giving neighbors the dignity of being understood as people that have much to contribute to our own communities, being “missional” alienates and harms.

Grace Boyd

Sequim, Washington

Summer Psalms

Thanks to Danny Duncan Collum for introducing me to Jessi Colter's album *The Psalms* (“Strange and Beautiful Psalms,” July 2017).

It is a balm to me during this summer's heat. Once you hear it, there's no turning back.

Dennis Abney

Orlando, Florida

New Language Needed

Regarding Leslie Copeland-Tune's article “A Bad and Unjust Idea” in the June 2017 issue: I am frustrated when Medicare and Social Security are called “entitlement” programs. Of course, all who have contributed into each fund during their working lives are entitled to the benefits we receive, but Medicare is a federal health insurance program and Social Security is a federal retirement program. Unfortunately, both funds have been raided by Congress for other purposes and are now in some jeopardy. Perhaps if we used language other than “entitlements,” which gives the impression of being undeserved, these programs would be held in higher regard and protected.

Susan Holcomb

Newberg, Oregon

“But wait!” Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, Sojourners, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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BY JIM WALLIS

'Is This Not the Fast I Choose?'



PRAYER, FASTING, and advocacy are all spiritual disciplines—ones that we need right now. Several faith leaders came together this spring to call our brothers and sisters in our diverse faith communities to tie these three spiritual disciplines together “for such a time as this.”

What kind of time is this? We are living in a time when vulnerable people in the United States and around the world are facing tremendous threats from this administration and this Congress—threats that will be on vivid display in the budget debates that will consume Congress after Labor Day:

- The president’s budget proposes as much as \$800 billion of cuts to mandatory spending programs over the next decade. These cuts are primarily aimed at programs that help

immoral one. Demonizing the poor and slashing programs that benefit low-income people—while refusing to scrutinize the much larger subsidies we provide to the wealthy—is hypocritical and cruel.

In the book of Esther, Mordecai tells Esther that God has put her in a position of influence “for such a time as this.” As the wife of the Persian king, she has access to the one person who has the power to save the Jewish people from destruction.

We find ourselves in a similar moment—with a president and Congress pushing for deep cuts to programs that are vital to poor and vulnerable people. We have the power to influence our elected officials, but that power needs to be rooted deeply in our faith—and used to call upon political leaders to exercise theirs.

Several of us have begun observing a day of fasting on the 21st of each month, and we will continue through the end of the 115th Congress in December 2018. We chose the 21st as the day for our fast because it is the day each month by which the average family on the SNAP program has used 90 percent of its benefits. President Trump’s budget proposal would cut the SNAP program by more than 25 percent over 10 years. Cutting deeply from a program that already leaves poor working families at risk of hunger for nearly one third of each month will greatly exacerbate the problem, causing more families, including children, to go to bed hungry.

On June 21, we marked the second month of our fast by bringing together Christian leaders from across the theological and political spectrum to speak with one voice in opposition to the Trump administration’s budget. We made this joint statement under the banner of the Circle of Protection, a broad coalition of leaders from all branches of

U.S. Christianity, founded in 2011 in service of the biblical mandate to protect poor and vulnerable people. It is significant that the first major ecumenical statement during the Trump presidency was focused on protecting vulnerable people.

On June 21, we wrote:

The biblical prophets remind us that how we treat the most marginal and vulnerable among us is the test of a nation’s moral righteousness—telling kings and rulers that the measure of their governance is the well-being of those most in need. ... We have deep moral concerns about the way this budget would impact those we are called to protect. ... Therefore, we call on our members and congregations to contact their representatives to express their Christian convictions on these critical matters of public policy. We will ask all our constituencies to urge their members of the House and Senate to not cut programs that protect poor people and families.

As bipartisan Christian leaders, rising above the political debates, we are determined to focus on the biblical mandate to protect the poor and to remind legislators that budgets are moral documents. “Is not this the fast that I choose,” says the prophet Isaiah, “to loose bonds of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”

Through the sustained spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting, we can nourish our action and advocacy, renewing our dedication to speak out clearly and publicly in defense of those who need it most. Jesus reminds all who would name his name, “As you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

Trump’s budget cuts \$800 billion from programs for the poor—and has a \$43 billion increase in military spending.

the poor, including Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), Supplemental Security Income (for poor people who are elderly or disabled), and child nutrition programs, to name a few.

- President Trump calls for a \$43 billion increase in military spending, reversing the biblical call to beat swords into plowshares.

- The president’s budget proposes deep cuts to foreign assistance—even as four countries in Africa and the Middle East are falling into famine.

We in the faith community must stand up to these deeply flawed priorities, to say that the choice to protect the rich instead of the poor in the name of deficit reduction is an



A woman waits to hear President Barack Obama speak on health care in 2013.

Getty Images

By James Misak

Here's to Health!

The story that often gets overlooked: The Affordable Care Act actually works.

I AM A FAMILY PHYSICIAN in Cleveland. For more than two decades, I have cared for lower-income families whose health struggles were made worse by their inability to afford private health insurance or to qualify for publicly funded health insurance through Medicaid or Medicare. Very few of their employers offer health insurance. This results in unaffordable medications and treatments, poor control of chronic illnesses, and avoidable complications from these illnesses.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 represented a sea change in the lives of my patients. They benefitted from two major health-insurance expansions: individual health-insurance exchanges, with subsidies to help middle-income families buy private insurance, and an expansion of Medicaid.

More than 20 million previously uninsured Americans—including many of my patients—now have health insurance under

the ACA, and the nation's uninsured rate is at a historic low.

Because of the ACA, my previously uninsured patients can afford medications and treatments, get their chronic illnesses under control, return to work, and become more engaged in their families and com-

More than 20 million previously uninsured Americans, including many of my patients, now have health insurance.

munities. Many of them referred to the insurance they now are able to access as a lifesaver.

For example, my patient Mary is diabetic and lost her job. As a result, she became uninsured, and she could no longer afford her diabetes medications and testing supplies. She made repeated trips to the emergency room when diabetic crises arose. Then she became eligible for Ohio's Medicaid expansion,

which began in 2014. After working with my medical team and having access to needed medications, Mary now has her diabetes under control, she is back at work, and she says she's never felt better.

My patient Joe went to the emergency room one day with a cough. A chest X-ray showed a spot on his lung. Uninsured, Joe went without medical care for months until Ohio's Medicaid expansion provided coverage. After seeing me and getting the appropriate testing, Joe was diagnosed with early-stage lung cancer, which thankfully was treated while it was still curable. Joe is now back at work.

The health-care act passed by the House of Representatives this spring would have removed \$1 trillion from Medicaid and the individual insurance market, denying Medicaid to millions of Americans and making private insurance unaffordable to millions more, while at the same time

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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providing hundreds of millions of tax-cut dollars to very wealthy Americans. (The Senate version would have been even worse.) "I have never seen members of Congress vote to so deeply hurt so many of their own constituents," wrote Robert Greenstein of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Greenstein called the GOP bills "the biggest assault on ordinary Americans—and the largest Robin-Hood-in-reverse transfer of income up the income scale, from low- and middle-income families to those at the top—in our country's modern history."

The United States is the only high-income country without nearly universal health-care coverage. There are several policies that could bring our country more in line with other industrialized nations while keeping the major structures of our health insurance

system in place: continue funding Medicaid as a responsive entitlement; continue Medicaid expansion; continue to stabilize the individual health-insurance exchanges through a combination of tax credits and cost-sharing subsidies to middle-income families that are tied to the actual cost of insurance; allow individuals in the private market to purchase Medicaid in regions where private insurers do not offer coverage; and lower the age of Medicare eligibility from 65 to 60.

Responsible health-care coverage is not a matter of right and left; it's a matter of right and wrong. ■

James Misak is a family physician in Cleveland and an assistant professor of family medicine at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine.

By Christiana Zenner Peppard

Come Ye to the Waters (If You Can Afford It)

Trump's plan to sell water systems to the highest bidder is going to cost you.

FRESH-WATER CRISES have become regular headline news—think of the water shutoffs in Detroit, the systemic contamination combined with structural racism in Flint, the ongoing angst over algal blooms in Lake Erie, and drought in many parts of the country.

When President Trump extolled the importance of investing in infrastructure, water scholars such as myself wondered: What might this mean for the water supply, treatment plants, and distribution systems that strive to keep our country quenched and flushed?

Trump's proposed budget begins to answer this question. An example can be found in his proposal to sell off the Washington Aqueduct, which provides potable water to Washington, D.C., and two counties in Virginia.

Trump's privatization proposal is vague, but it tilts toward private enterprise in the ownership and management of our nation's water infrastructure. The "aqueduct divestiture" proposal supposedly is intended to trim the assets and liabilities of the federal

government. It reflects of one of Trump's key principles for addressing the costs of infrastructure maintenance (for highways, bridges, and aviation): "Leverage the private sector" to "provide valuable benefits for the delivery of infrastructure, through better procurement methods, market discipline, and a long-term focus on maintaining assets."

Local control and the participation of affected communities are key components for providing equitable and just water service. Privatization does *not* ensure local control because the entities with the knowledge and resources to bid on major infrastructure

projects are most likely to be multinational corporations for which managing a water system is fundamentally linked to return on investment. Profit often outweighs local participation; fees and rates for residents usually increase when systems are privatized.

The potential of selling to a foreign company the water infrastructure that supplies D.C. raises critical political and ethical questions: When it comes to water

Water should not be subject to the whims of the marketplace.

From the Archives

September-October 2000

Virtual Hate

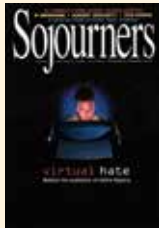
HATRED HAS gotten a facelift. With the help of internet technology and cyberspace marketing, once-decrepit organizations like the Ku Klux Klan are regaining their youthful energy and competing for the attention of increasingly educated audiences. ... Behind the virtual makeover hides the same old-fashioned hatred that bigots have always promoted.

The internet has given hate groups ample reason to feel young again. In the United States, online bigots enjoy full protection under the First Amendment and have access to a potentially limitless audience. Webmasters are anonymous and difficult to silence; leaders suffer few consequences for their followers' actions. And their strategies for organizational growth are beginning to look more corporate than cross-lit. ...

Virtual haters twist scripture into a white-power pretzel. The most common version of their convoluted hermeneutics is "Identity" thought, a theology that uses the Bible to justify racism and to prophesy apocalyptic judgment against non-white, non-Aryan races.

Identity sites are often eye-glazingly similar. Scripture is quoted at great length and with great gusto. Jews are the seen as the "anti-Christ" or "Satan's seed." Persons of color are deemed the "Unchosen" or "mud people." Self-preservation of the white race becomes an imperative for true "Christians," regardless of the personal costs involved. ■

Stacia M. Brown worked for the Emory University Center for Ethics in Public Policy and the Professions when this article appeared.



infrastructure, what does "best" mean—most efficient, most equitable, most just? What constitute "appropriate market and regulatory incentives"? And what constraints are necessary to protect the most vulnerable populations?

Here, Christian theologies provide wisdom and ethical insights. Groups such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Ecumenical Water Network, and the Catholic Church are increasingly unified in the belief that water is a gift from God, a source of life, and a baseline for the realization of all human rights. Therefore, water is not a "thing" to be remanded to the distributive whims of market-based practices.

Justice should guide the governance and protection of water resources. Thus, for example, Pope Francis concludes that the control of water should never be directed to the benefit of the few (for example, the profits of shareholders in a multinational corporation) at the expense of the many (as tends to occur when people living under structural conditions of racism or poverty are unable to pay high water bills due to rate increases).

Christian advocates—from the pope to the United Church of Christ—have argued persuasively that local communities must be

centrally consulted in any projects affecting their land or resources—a maxim that would serve well in places such as Detroit and Flint, Mich., and Standing Rock, in the Dakotas.

There are real success stories where local communities have used their water-based values to resist exploitative forms of private enterprise engagement—in Atlanta, Stockton, Calif., and Vancouver, B.C., to name a few. The Blue Communities Project gives more examples of constructive, participatory approaches, including banning the sale of bottled water in public facilities or events, recognizing water as a human right, and promoting publicly financed and owned water services.

The Trump administration's proposal to sell the Washington Aqueduct raises more questions than it resolves. Under any circumstances, the question for U.S. citizens remains: What is the relationship between figures on a balance sheet and the infrastructure that supplies the conditions of daily life? ■

Christiana Zenner Peppard, author of Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis, is an associate professor of theology, science, and ethics at Fordham University in New York City.

By Karen Clifton

Death Throes for the Death Penalty?

Public opposition to capital punishment is at an all-time high. Will politicians listen?

ON JUNE 29, death penalty abolitionists gathered for a four-day fast and vigil on the steps of the Supreme Court. The fast began on the anniversary of the 1972 decision that struck down the death penalty as unconstitutional and ended on the anniversary of the court's 1976 decision to reinstate it. These activists serve as witnesses to the full arc of the political climate in which the death penalty exists in the United States.

There were signs a year ago that the death penalty in the U.S. was on its last legs. More recently, capital punishment is resurging, a shift fueled by politicians projecting fear on an anxious public. But there is hope.

Last year ended with the fewest number of executions in a quarter century—and the

fewest number of people sentenced to death in modern U.S. history. Public opposition to the death penalty has greatly increased. A 2016 Pew Research Center report shows opposition to the death penalty is now the highest it has been since 1966; support for the death penalty is now below 50 percent, its lowest in more than four decades. Americans are demanding that the inherent dignity of the human person be respected.

However, a perilous undercurrent has developed as politicians are using the death penalty for political gain. In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott issued a series of executive orders in April to remove 21 first-degree murder cases from State Attorney Aramis Ayala (the only African-American elected

prosecutor in Florida) and transfer them to another state attorney after Ayala announced that her office would not pursue the death penalty in murder prosecutions. Ayala's spokesperson said that Ayala's position remains that "the governor is abusing his authority and has compromised the independence and integrity of the criminal justice system."

In Arkansas, fueled by the expiration date of a lethal injection drug, Gov. Asa Hutchinson signed orders for an unprecedented eight executions to be carried out over 10 days in April. In Alabama, Gov.

Have we forgotten the power of Christ's death and resurrection?

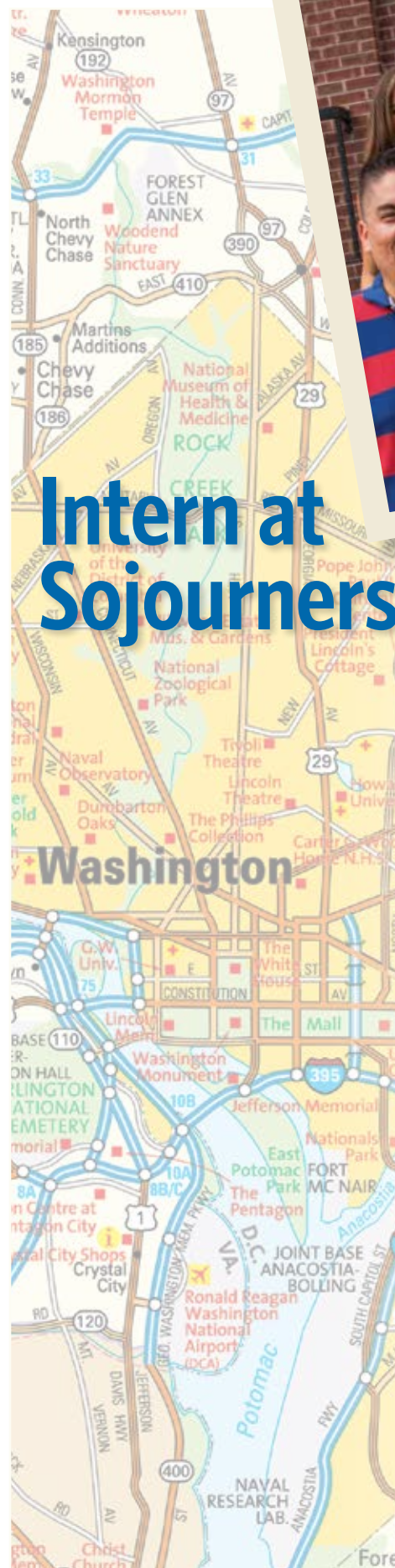
Kay Ivey in May signed into law a statute designed to shorten the state death-penalty appeals process, which critics say will hamper due process.

Despite the growing public opposition to the death penalty, political leaders are using capital punishment—which often disproportionately ensnares those who are Latino or African American, poor, intellectually disabled, or mentally ill—to exploit partisan divisions. They are using as scapegoats those whom the death penalty arbitrarily and unfairly targets.

Have we become so complacent in our faith that we have forgotten the power of Christ's death and resurrection? The immense sin of scapegoating is revealed in Jesus' crucifixion, which provides a prime example of the lengths to which political leaders will go to maintain power.

If we are to fulfill our call to be disciples of Christ, then we must resist, like the death penalty abolitionists at the Supreme Court. We must not let the strides we have made in defense of life be overtaken by politically motivated fear—or let our political leaders use the death penalty as a tool for their own agendas. ■

Karen Clifton is executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network (catholicmobilizing.org), a national Catholic organization working to end the death penalty and promote restorative justice in the United States.



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VIDEO



Linda Sarsour at Sojourners' Summit in June

J.P. Keenan

Faithful Dissent

The normalization of injustice and disenfranchisement calls the faithful to resist, but sustainable dissent must also include healing—a reconciliation with our bodies, our relationships, and God. So earlier this year, Sojourners invited a diverse group of faith leaders, activists, artists, scholars, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists to gather in Washington, D.C., for The Summit, to work out what healing and resistance look like in 2017. You can listen in on these conversations—which include Linda Sarsour, Margaret Atwood, Joshua DuBois, Traci Blackmon, and Alexia Salvatierra—at summitforchange.com/watch.

QUOTED

“When we put someone to death, we’re saying that we don’t believe in Christian orthodoxy.” —**Jeff Hood** on the death penalty
sojo.net/execution

SPIRITUALITY



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Heal Thyself?

The core of the contemplative path is not just an individualistic process,” writes trauma therapist Teresa Pasquale Mateus. “It is about being a deeper part of the communal human family through the action of how we live out a just and radical spiritual truth.”

Yet when we need healing in our own lives, Mateus points out, Christians often lose this communal focus: “Self-care that is done in a silo becomes a Band-Aid for greater pain that cannot be mended or healed by a single trip for a massage or nail appointment or walk in the woods. Although these things are beautiful care practices, and are certainly starting points to a rhythm of life that offers deeper healing, they are not the depth in and of themselves. When we send people off alone to do one-off self-care, we also set them up for failure. I have met so many activists who feel burned out, who have tried individual plans of self-care and felt deep shame and disappointment that within a short time they are exhausted and short-fused again.

“Why can we imagine that faith worship happens in community, activism happens in community, yet healing should be siloed to independent self-care practices done alone? Deep healing also requires the resources of deep spirituality and deep community—rituals and practices that can be done alone but also shared, and become part of a larger rhythm of life that is beyond one practice and becomes a network of ways of being that move with us in every breath and heartbeat.”

Read more at sojo.net/healing.

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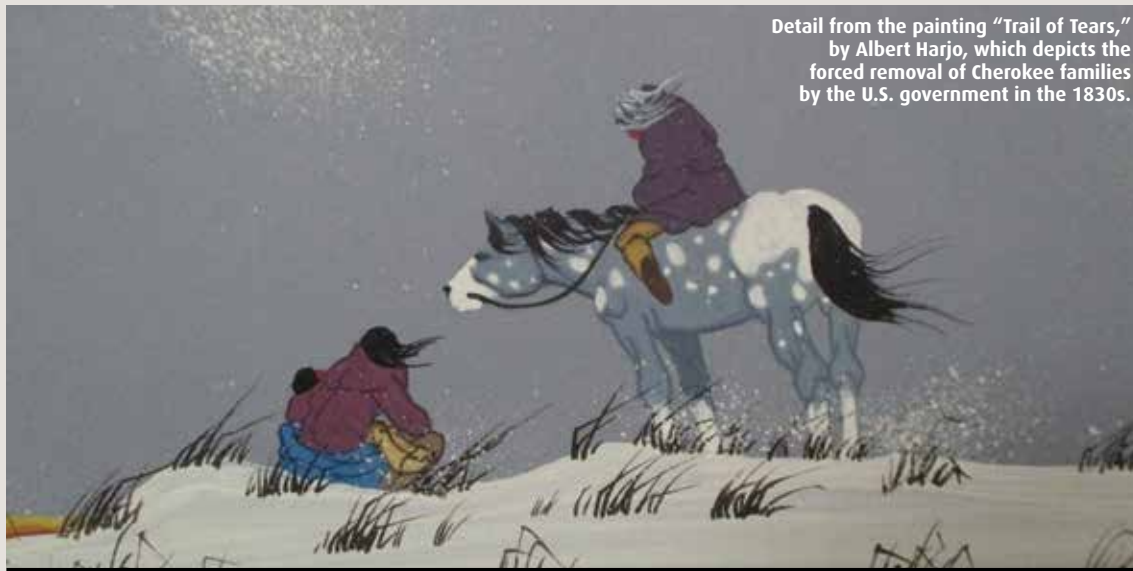
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Detail from the painting "Trail of Tears," by Albert Harjo, which depicts the forced removal of Cherokee families by the U.S. government in the 1830s.

This Happened

"ONCE UPON A TIME ..." We like that. Four words signal to our colonized brains: "It's story time!" We're gonna go on an adventure! We're gonna meet mice and pumpkins and fairy godmothers and wicked stepmothers and oppressed blonde women wearing baby-blue peasant wear and neat white aprons. And we're gonna fall in looooooove. Ahhhh ...

July 2003. Rolling across the northern South, I follow a story, from tourist trap to tourist trap along the Cherokee Trail of Tears. "Watch the

says. Say the things that happened, the things that could happen, the things that are happening.

Listen to the story of the little black boy who fights off roaches the size of his toes and the rats that follow, nibbling on his lips in the middle of the night. Shrieks of horror from his mother standing beside herself upon the revelation that her baby has been eaten, consumed, because that's where we pushed them—that's where the collective us, U.S., pushed them—quarantined in dilapidated Northern filth after fleeing the terror of burning Southern crosses and swinging feet twitching, suspended from the same bloodstained tree his grandfather planted on the Aiken plantation.

That story.

And the story of the 20 or so Chinese men from Guangdong province in southern China, who boarded a ship in the 1860s to escape poverty and persecution only to be mutilated and lynched by a mob of 500 white men in the "Calle de los Negros" in the City of Angels, 1871.

And the story of the Tongva people—the original people of Los Angeles.

Removed by conquistadores. Missionized. Separated. Exploited. Christianized. Colonized. Put in their place.

These stories.

And the story of the moment it sank in and the expression on Maria Anita Jose's face when she learned she was no longer Mexican—that *los blancos* had declared her "Californian."

And the story of the European immigrant fleeing drought, plague, religious persecution, and the feudal caste system of Europe in search of a new way of being in the world—a noble dream that plowed a wake of recurring nightmares to the four corners of the Earth.

Inside there is a whisper rising: "Forget 'Once upon a time' ..."

It says, "This happened!"

This ... happened.

Let the stories be told though the heavens may fall. ■

"Bear witness," the peacemaker says. Say the things that happened.

metanarrative," says Randy Woodley, our guide on the journey. What do the museums, the plays, the tourist shops want Americans to believe about themselves? "God guided us West." "It was destiny." "Those featherheaded people became our friends." Or: "They were dead before we got here." Or: "They just *left*. Sure, they were 'removed,' but we had a hoe-down for the ones who hid in the hills and stayed."

"Bear witness," the peacemaker



Lisa Sharon Harper is a speaker, trainer, writer, activist, and the author, most recently, of The Very Good Gospel. This was presented as a performance poem at The Summit 2017 in Washington, D.C.

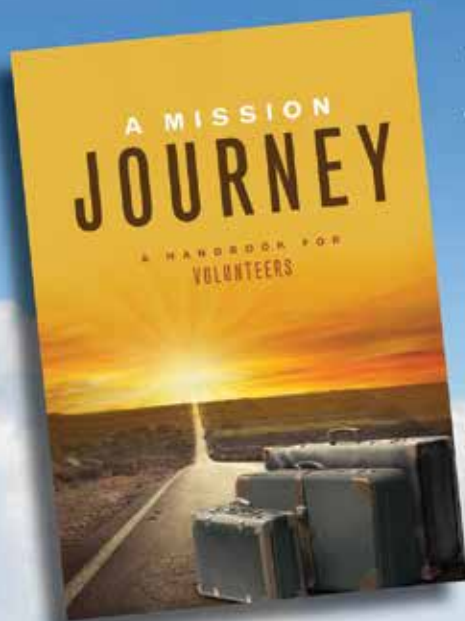
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Clash of Liberties

It's possible to find the balance when religious freedom and civil rights clash—but only when we set aside our tribal differences and work together.

by **OLIVER THOMAS**

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY is very popular in the abstract. It's only in its application that we begin shouting at one another.

Take the executive order on religious freedom that President Trump signed earlier this year: Depending on your perspective, the order was either “a welcome change in direction toward people of faith from the White House,” as Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission president Russell Moore said, or it was a smokescreen for bigotry giving the U.S. government “license to discriminate,” in the words of Sarah Warbelow of the Human Rights Campaign.

So how did we get here?

Cactus and conscience. There was a time when compromises, and progress, were still possible. That was surely on display in the Rose Garden one beautiful fall day in 1993 when scions of the Left, including the ACLU, Americans United, and People for the American Way, stood alongside those of the Right to watch President Bill Clinton sign a landmark civil rights bill, called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, into law. The bill had bipartisan sponsorship in both chambers of Congress and passed *unanimously* in the House. Imagine that.

Images: Shutterstock





Pro-life groups
conceded that even the
most-liberal Americans
deserved to have their
day in court.

The celebratory crowd on hand at the White House was witnessing a course correction of a 1990 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. The case—*Employment Division v. Smith*—involved the use of peyote, a cactus with hallucinogenic properties. The state of Oregon wished to punish two confessed peyote users by denying them unemployment benefits, despite the fact that the two were Native Americans using peyote pursuant to ancient tribal religious practice.

Up until this point in U.S. history, the constitutionally enshrined right to religious freedom outlined in the First Amendment—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”—had been enforced through the use of a balancing test. Whenever someone demonstrated that the government was restricting their religious practice, the burden of proof was on the government to show: 1) the restrictions were necessary to accomplish a “compelling governmental interest” such as health or safety, and 2) the restrictions were the “least restrictive means” of pursuing that interest.

Sometimes the religious claimants won (as did the Amish when they withdrew their children from formal education after the eighth grade) and sometimes they lost (as did Rastafarians when they smoked marijuana in violation of criminal laws), but in all cases the religious claimants had their day in court.

According to an exhaustive 1990 study published in the *Harvard Law Review*, this balancing test was used to evaluate claims of conscience since colonial times. But in *Employment Division v. Smith*, the Supreme Court did something entirely new: Instead of applying the traditional balancing test to the facts of the case, it changed the test altogether.

In the majority opinion written by Justice Antonin Scalia, the court ruled that the government no longer needed to prove a “compelling interest” or that it had pursued its interest in the least-restrictive means necessary. Instead, the government now only needed to show that it had not discriminated against a religious practitioner.

So if a Southern county allowed the sale of alcohol, nondiscrimination meant that a Catholic priest could also purchase wine. Fair enough. But in one of the many “dry” counties across the South where the sale of alcohol is prohibited, nondiscrimination also meant you could effectively outlaw the central sacrament of Roman

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to the People of America.

Catholicism, and the church would have no recourse. In the eyes of the court, this was fair: The priest wasn't being singled out; he was simply being treated like everyone else. (The recent Trinity Lutheran decision continues the court's reliance on non-discrimination as the touchstone for free-exercise cases.)

The importance of the Smith decision was immediate and far-reaching. Within a few years, we saw that Amish farmers, Sikh construction workers, Jewish servicemen, evangelical Christians—indeed, every minority religion in America—were at the mercy of government regulators.

And the reality in America is this: We're all in the minority somewhere. Southern Baptists may not need to worry about their religious freedom in Birmingham, Ala., but move them to Portland, Ore., and they are suddenly as vulnerable as anyone else. The same is true for the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), who discovered that while it may be a snap to secure a building permit for a temple in Utah, it is not so easy in Tennessee.

Read our lapels. When the Smith decision was handed down by the court, I was serving as general counsel to the Baptist Joint Committee, one of the oldest religious liberty agencies in America. Together with the director of perhaps the oldest civil liberties organization—Mort Halperin, of the ALCU's Washington office—we assembled a coalition of religious and civil rights groups to right the wrong committed by Justice Scalia and the court. We drafted the bill that became the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, or RFRA (pronounced “riff-ra”); more than 75 national organizations joined us.

At its heart, RFRA was about fairness. Every claimant under the law would be entitled to the same protection: Prove that the government has placed a substantial burden on your sincere religious practice, and the government would have to prove in court that the burden was necessary to achieve a compelling government interest. If there were other, less burdensome, ways to accomplish the government's interest, the religious claimant would win.

The effort hit a snag when the Catholic Church decided to oppose the bill on the grounds that some women—after consulting with their ministers or rabbis—might try to use the new law to challenge

state restrictions on abortion. Their reasoning went something like this: If *Roe v. Wade* were overturned, some states would outlaw abortion. In those states, women might use RFRA to circumvent these laws by arguing that their religious convictions led them to seek an abortion. Admittedly, it was far-fetched, but it stymied our efforts to pass RFRA until the Supreme Court made clear in 1992 that *Roe v. Wade* was not going to be overturned. Once our Catholic friends signed on, the seas calmed. RFRA would apply evenhandedly to everybody. “Religious freedom for all” became the rallying cry. We even handed out lapel buttons with the new slogan.

Game, set, match. After RFRA was signed into law in the Rose Garden, things were quiet for a few years until a small, historic Catholic Church in Boerne, Texas, began bursting at the seams. The bishop okayed an expansion of their building, but local government bureaucrats argued that the church was a historic landmark and couldn't be enlarged—even though the church had designed and paid for the original building and their ongoing mission now required the larger space.

Using RFRA, the church argued that the city's historical preservation laws placed a substantial burden on their religious practice—and won. But the city of Boerne appealed the decision to Supreme Court, which issued another unexpected decision. A 6-3 majority of the court opined that Congress had overstepped its constitutional authority in applying the compelling interest test of RFRA—a piece of federal legislation—to state and local governments, such as the city of Boerne.

Game, set, match for the local bureaucrats and tough luck for the church. If the church had to hold 10 services each Sunday to accommodate the crowds, so be it.

The reaction in the religious and civil rights communities was both swift and purposeful. Experts convened to craft an alternative bill that would correct RFRA's

What's religious freedom got to do with...

Abercrombie & Fitch



The preppy clothier refused to hire a Muslim woman because her headscarf violated the company's “look policy,” but in 2015 the Supreme Court ruled the company had violated federal employment laws banning religious discrimination.

What's religious freedom got to do with...

Wedding Cakes



If a baker doesn't support same-sex marriage for religious reasons, is the baker still required to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding? The Supreme Court will decide in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, which it will hear later this year.



These new laws sought to tilt the playing field in favor of religion—traditional, conservative religion.

constitutional flaws, and the resulting legislation was dubbed “The Religious Liberty Protection Act of 1998” (RLPA). The House bill passed by a comfortable margin, but a storm blew in on the Senate. LGBTQ advocates convinced Sen. Edward Kennedy, one of the bill’s Democratic sponsors, that its passage threatened anti-discrimination ordinances that were being adopted in a growing number of cities. If a city makes it illegal for landlords to refuse an apartment to same-sex couples, advocates reasoned, RLPA might be used by conservative religionists to escape the impact of these new public-accommodation laws.

Theoretically, LGBTQ advocates were correct: The constitutional protections contained in RLPA mean that conservative religionists—just like members of any religious tradition—were free to challenge anything they felt was an affront to their sincerely held religious beliefs. Americans have always been free to raise such claims and defenses. But religious challenges to public-accommodation laws are highly unlikely to prevail. Nearly all courts consider anti-discrimination laws to satisfy the “compelling interest test” codified by RFRA and its progeny as acceptable reasons to burden someone’s religious practice. But LGBTQ advocates were in no mood for compromise, and the bill was pulled.

I was reeling. I had been one of the few Baptist clergy members to testify in support of the first federal law to prevent LGBTQ discrimination—the Employment

Non-Discrimination Act. When some—including the U.S. Catholic Conference and National Right to Life Committee—had assailed RFRA as a tool for pro-choice groups, courageous conservatives such as the Christian Legal Society and National Association of Evangelicals had stuck to the principle of “Religious Freedom for All.”

These pro-life groups conceded that even the most-liberal Americans deserved to have their day in court. Now my liberal friends were doing just the opposite: Instead of pursuing their civil rights agenda within the confines of the traditional constitutional standard, they were seeking to guarantee their own victory by denying religious conservatives the right to even *raise* these faith-based defenses.

Tilting the playing field. Which brings us to where we are today: Congress eventually passed a less-ambitious version of RLPA that skipped over gay rights, abortion, and

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to both United States of America.

other contentious topics. Meanwhile, a number of states began passing their own religious liberty laws modeled on the federal RFRA. Early versions of these state RFRA tracked the federal law very closely and caused little or no controversy. But as more religious claimants failed in their efforts to challenge gay rights laws, some sponsors of state religious-liberty laws wanted to go further. Just as

What's religious freedom got to do with...

Pasta Strainers

Members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster want to wear their religious headgear—a colander—in their driver's license photos, but in 2016 courts ruled that "Pastafarianism" is a parody, not a real religion, and thus not subject to religious protection.



LGBTQ advocates had killed RLPA in order to give same-sex couples a better chance of winning their disputes with religiously conservative landlords, these conservatives were now trying to guarantee that the landlord or restaurant owner would win.

In North Dakota, for example, religious conservatives sought to eliminate the requirement that government-imposed restrictions on religion

be "substantial" before subjecting them to the "compelling interest" test. This meant that even indirect and remote burdens would be subject to strict scrutiny. So not only might you be able to send your child to a parochial school, you might be able to force the state to pay for it. In Mississippi, the proposed law sought to protect people who refuse to provide services due to their religious objections about same-sex marriage, extra-marital sex, or a person's transgender status. The North Dakota law failed; the Mississippi law passed (and was later struck down by a district judge). Similar statutes were introduced in Arizona, Indiana, and Georgia with varying results. The common thread in most of these new laws was they sought to tilt the playing field in favor of religion—traditional, conservative religion.

While these highly controversial religious freedom bills were being debated in state legislatures across the nation, other religious conservatives were fighting things out in the courts. That's exactly where RFRA envisioned such claims

would be debated and decided, but some of these claims had gone beyond what the RFRA coalition had envisioned religious organizations and individuals would need to protect their liberty of conscience. Specifically, large, for-profit businesses were claiming that they should be exempted from insurance laws requiring them to provide contraceptives. Even religious organizations that already qualified for exemptions under the Affordable Care Act claimed that simply filing the request for an exemption substantially burdened their exercise of religion.

Though discouraging, none of the rancor that has gone on in state legislatures and the courts should surprise us. This is not religious liberty in the abstract; it's gritty and real. For liberals and members of the LGBTQ community, the folks claiming rights of conscience are denying access to such fundamental human needs as housing and health care. How could anyone *not* take offense at that?

On the other side, conservative religionists question why they should be asked to violate some of the most fundamental teachings of their faith by aiding and abetting same-sex marriage when other wedding photographers, bakers, or landlords might be willing to provide the couple with these services. The same goes for the religious employers who object to being forced to provide contraceptives to their employees. Of course, Americans must learn to live together with our deepest differences. But finding a constituency for the common good seems harder and harder in this age of identity politics.

We the ... tribe? Which is why RFRA is so important, for both liberals and conservatives alike. First, there is no America without liberty of conscience. Along with

What's religious freedom got to do with...

Cheerleaders

After Texas cheerleaders held signs encouraging their team with Bible verses at a public-school football game, the Freedom From Religion Foundation alleged they were violating the Constitution. But in 2016 the state Supreme Court ruled that the signs qualified as free speech.



What's religious freedom got to do with...

Oil Pipelines

The Cheyenne River Sioux argued that completing the Dakota Access Pipeline would substantially burden their religious practice by desecrating the water used in a sacred ceremony. A U.S. judge dismissed the claim in March.



the other freedoms set forth in our Constitution and Bill of Rights, our freedom of conscience is literally what defines us as a people. Not whether we are white, black, brown, queer, straight, Republican, or Democrat. Our "tribes" are important, but the Constitution does not



This is not religious liberty in the abstract; it's gritty and real.

begin “We the tribe.” We are Americans because we share the “inalienable” rights and responsibilities expressed in our founding documents.

Second, RFRA applies its time-tested protections for conscience evenly to all. It may be conservatives who are invoking RFRA today, but believe me, it will be liberals tomorrow. We saw this during the '60s when the First Amendment was invoked to protect both civil rights workers and anti-war protesters.

Still, hope for the future sometimes arrives in the unlikeliest of places. Most recently it came in a state dominated by religious conservatives.

Mormons may be the last people on the planet you would expect to support a gay-rights law, but that's exactly what they did. And the LGBTQ community in Utah might be the last group of liberals you would expect to respect the convictions of religious conservatives. But that's what they did. In 2015, Utah passed a law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in housing and employment. And the new law provides respectful accommodations for the Latter Day Saints to ensure that they can continue their mission without compromising the moral convictions of the church. Mormon churches and church agencies will not be forced to conduct same-sex marriages or to abandon their right to discriminate on the basis of church doctrine when they hire and fire.

In short, America still works. But only when we are able to lay aside our tribal differences and work for the common good.

Almost sounds like loving our neighbors as ourselves, yes? ■

What's religious freedom got to do with...

The Sanctuary Movement



It's unclear whether a church illegally sheltering undocumented immigrants in accordance with its religious convictions could appeal to religious freedom for legal protection. Similar defenses did not

work in the 1980s, and no known cases are pending.

Oliver “Buzz” Thomas is a minister, constitutional lawyer, and member of the USA Today board of contributors.

At Play in the Fields of Church and State

How a Lutheran preschool playground became the setting for a major religious liberty debate.

IN JUNE, THE U.S. SUPREME COURT ruled in favor of a Lutheran church in Missouri seeking state funding to replace the gravel yard of its playground with a softer surface made of recycled tires. But was it a victory for religious freedom or a violation of the principles separating church and state? *Sojourners* associate editor Betsy Shirley interviewed Charles C. Haynes, founding director of the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute, to help sort it all out.



Charles C. Haynes

that direct funding of religion by government is a violation of conscience prohibited by the Establishment Clause. Where we disagree is the question of where to draw the line on what constitutes funding or support for religion by government. As the *Trinity* case confirms, the majority of the current court sees no problem with equal treatment for religious groups applying for government funding programs available to secular groups. To exclude religious groups, the majority argues, is religious discrimination in violation of the Free Exercise Clause.

SOJOURNERS: Let's start with the basics: Where does the idea of "separation of church and state" come from?

Charles Haynes: The Establishment Clause—or, more accurately, the “no establishment clause”—is the part of the First Amendment that separates church from state, preventing the entanglement of religion and government that has been the source of repression and conflict for much of human history. But it also protects the right of religious groups and individuals to participate fully in the public square of America.

What about the right to worship freely? The Free Exercise Clause guarantees liberty of conscience for people of all faiths and none. It protects our freedom to practice our religion openly and freely without governmental interference. The two religious-liberty clauses protect one freedom: liberty of conscience for all.

What do these clauses have to do with *Trinity Lutheran's* playground? *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer* is the latest in a long line of cases concerning government funding and religious institutions. The decision in *Trinity* builds on a trend in recent decades toward a more “accommodationist” reading of the Establishment Clause, lowering the “wall of separation” to allow more accommodation of religion by government.

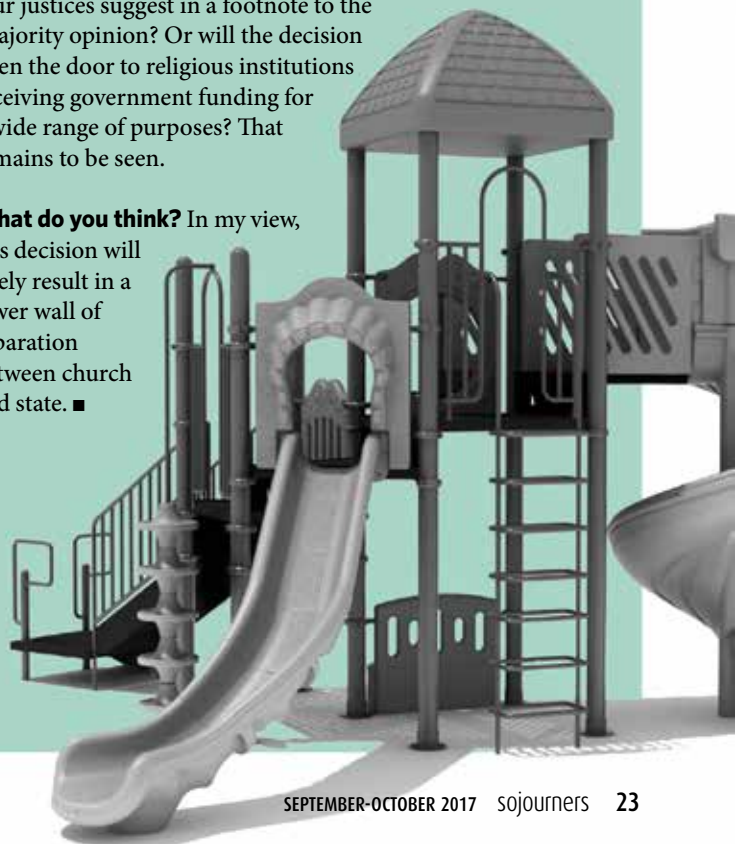
What do you mean by “more accommodation”? Even though the Missouri state constitution prohibits funding of religion, the high court found the playground improvement funds were for the health and safety of children and did not constitute direct state aid to religion. Religious institutions are, therefore, eligible to apply for those funds on the same basis as secular institutions.

Why was this controversial? The majority of the Supreme Court—and the majority of Americans—agree

But if the government gives money to a church, doesn't that violate the Establishment Clause? The argument that this funding would be used to support the religious mission of the church carried no weight with the majority. Establishment Clause concerns were conspicuously absent from the majority opinion. As a result, we can expect to see religious groups applying for and receiving government funding for a wide range of purposes.

What new questions about religious freedom does the *Trinity* decision raise? Will the decision be interpreted as limited to programs like “playground resurfacing,” as four justices suggest in a footnote to the majority opinion? Or will the decision open the door to religious institutions receiving government funding for a wide range of purposes? That remains to be seen.

What do you think? In my view, this decision will likely result in a lower wall of separation between church and state. ■



Like many others, I was
moved by her compassion
and courage. But that's not
what really drew me to her.

I was drawn by her doubt.

The Paradoxes of Mother Teresa

by **DEAN NELSON**

THE BANNER HANGING from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome showed Mother Teresa, hands clasped, looking out over the 100,000 faithful who had come to celebrate her sainthood. I was part of that crowd last September, and as I looked at that banner I couldn't tell if her facial expression was a smile or a grimace.

In a museum a few blocks away were glass cases that displayed her sandals, her walking stick, and her blue and white sari, as well as letters, photos, and a timeline charting every major event in her life. In a different cathedral the night before, an orchestra and choir performed a magnificent original oratorio written in her honor.

Photo by John Downing/Getty Images





Under the banner's gaze at St. Peter's, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church was seated, along with dignitaries from dozens of countries. I wondered what thought bubble would be most appropriate if one suddenly appeared above Mother Teresa's depiction on the tapestry. I decided it would be this: "If you only knew."

I was seated in a section with members of the Missionaries of Charity, the order Mother Teresa started in Kolkata, including a few from the U.S. who had met her and worked alongside her in dif-

The silence created "such terrible darkness within me," she wrote, adding that "within me everything is icy cold," and "If you only knew what goes on within my heart. Sometimes the pain is so great that I feel as if everything will break. The smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains."

Mother Teresa was able to believe in God with her intellect, explained Peter Rollins in his book *Insurrection: To Believe is Human; To Doubt, Divine*, "but she passed through the white-hot

Many believers have experienced a "dark night of the soul." Few, I suspect, have had that dark night last 51 years.

ferent parts of the world. Most of the discussion before the Mass was about time they had spent with her. They served the poor with her; they washed feet; they touched the untouchables; they bathed and cared for the dying. They spoke of her boldness when she addressed national leaders, her challenge to businesses, churches, and countries to do more. Some claimed miracles as a result of invoking her intercession. One was hopeful that prayers to this newest saint would result in the healing of her son. Mother Teresa inspired them to serve those who are poor and hurting in their own communities.

Listening to all this, I thought she almost sounded like a superhero. Or a cliché.

'Doubt is the only way to know anything'

Like those in my section, I was moved by her compassion and courage. But that's not what really drew me to her. I was drawn by her doubt.

Throughout the celebratory Mass, my mind kept going to her book of letters to her spiritual advisers, where she repeatedly confessed her doubts and her experience of the absence of God for most of her time serving the poor in Kolkata. The book, *Come Be My Light*, was published in 2007, 10 years after her death.

Her experience of darkness caught her off guard, explained Brian Kolodiejchuk, who edited the letters. "Unable to feel His presence as she had earlier, she was bewildered and afraid. Was she going the 'wrong way?'" he wrote. She perceived a call from God when she was 36 to leave her teaching post and serve the poor. That's the last she heard from God.

Many believers have experienced a "dark night of the soul." Few, I suspect, have had that dark night last 51 years.

fires of forsakenness. She is, as such, a shining example of what it means to enter into the fundamental Christian event of Crucifixion."

She accomplished a great deal in her lifetime, based on that encounter with God. She motivated thousands more to serve others, won a Nobel Peace Prize, and helped create chapters of the Missionaries of Charity in 139 countries. More than 4,500 people have taken the Missionaries' vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, with the additional vow of service to the poorest of the poor. They serve people dying of HIV/AIDS, leprosy, and tuberculosis, and run soup kitchens, dispensaries, mobile clinics, orphanages, and schools. Yet she was a world-class doubter.

In his book *My Life With the Saints*, James Martin wrote: "What remains clear is that Mother Teresa struggled intensely in her spiritual life. And this makes what she accomplished even more extraordinary and her example more meaningful to me. Her ministry, based as it was on a singularly intimate encounter with Jesus that would gradually fade into silence, whether lengthy or lifelong, is a remarkable testimony of fidelity."

Doubt has played an important role throughout civilization. Jennifer Hecht's book *Doubt: A History* takes us from Greek doubt to the present age. Jesus, from the cross, expressed doubt, Hecht wrote, when he exclaimed, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" "It sounds like he was expecting something that did not seem to be happening," she wrote. In her description of Augustine, she said, "Even within the increasingly closed system of Christianity, doubt was understood as the only way to know anything."

Paul Tillich said that "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." Anne Lamott takes it a step further in her book *Plan B*. "The opposite

of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.” It’s also part of Zen thought, as is reflected in the phrase, “Great doubt: great awakening. Little doubt: little awakening. No doubt: no awakening.”

Superhero or villain?

The knowledge that Mother Teresa experienced profound doubt throughout her ministry actually enhanced the canonization experience for me. It made her less of a superhero, less of a cliché, less of a celebrity, and more of a complicated person who, when I thought about it, represented plenty of paradoxes.

And there’s nothing wrong with paradox. The Bible is full of them, such as the first shall be last, strength is found through weakness, power through humility, freedom through service, receiving by giving, victory over death by dying on a cross. Parker Palmer wrote an entire book on how the Christian life is pulled tight between what appear to be opposing points.

“Contradiction, paradox, the tension of opposites: These have always been at the heart of my experience, and I think I am not alone,” Palmer wrote in *The Promise of Paradox*. “I am tugged one way and then the other. My beliefs and my actions often seem at odds. My strengths are sometimes canceled by my weaknesses. My self, and the world around me, seem more a study in dissonance than a harmony of the integrated whole.”

Later in the book he described paradox by invoking physicist Neils Bohr, who said, “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.”

Not everyone was a fan of Mother Teresa, of course. Christopher Hitchens was probably her most famous and aggressive antagonist. He produced a documentary on her called *Hell’s Angel* in 1994. In his 1995 pamphlet “The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice,” he described her as a demagogue, similar to moneygrubbing televangelists, providing PR cover for dictators such as Haiti’s Jean-Claude Duvalier and criminals such as Charles Keating by accepting their stolen money, and he criticized her stand against abortion and contraception.

“Her success is not, therefore, a triumph of humility and simplicity,” Hitchens wrote. “It is another chapter in a millennial story which stretches back to the superstitious childhood of our species, and which depends on the exploitation of



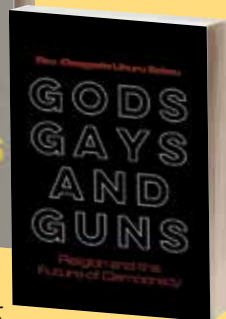
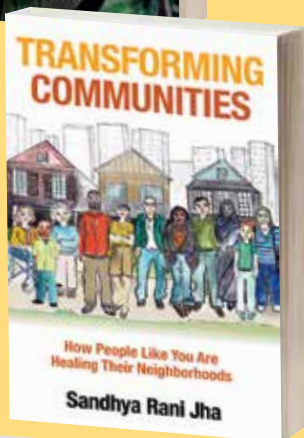
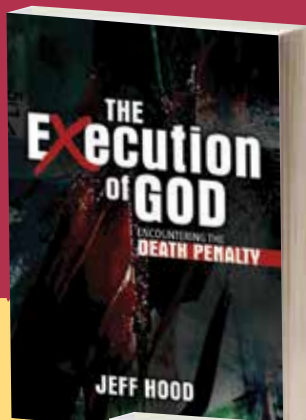
Photos from Mother Teresa’s early years, from top: Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (Teresa’s birth name), left, and her sister in traditional Macedonian clothing; a few days before her departure to Loreto Abbey in Ireland; and at left with another young nun in their novitiate in Darjeeling, India.



Archive photos

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the simple and the humble by the cunning and the single-minded." He called her a "religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer, and an accomplice of worldly, secular powers."

Yet the people I sat with at St. Peter's Square were all involved in some kind of service to the poor as a direct result of their encounters with this saint. They met her, were inspired by her, and in some cases were admonished by her, blessed by her, and moved by her to feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, shelter the homeless, and give water to the thirsty—because they took her at her word that when they did small things with great love, they were doing them for, and even to, Jesus.

This struck me as a paradox.

'Get out of here! Go love your neighbor.'

A few years ago I had lunch with Dr. Paul Farmer, one of the founders of Partners in Health, widely known for his work to eradicate disease in Haiti, Rwanda, Peru, and elsewhere. Our conversation turned to Mother Teresa and the hospice she opened, the "home for the dying destitutes." I know people who have volunteered there, and their lives were changed as a result of the experience. Farmer visibly bristled when I mentioned her, and I asked why. He acknowledged that it wasn't a popular position to criticize her, but he got worked up as he described the unsanitary conditions of the facility, wondered why more of the money donated wasn't spent on medicine or at least on alleviating pain, and questioned why many of the suffering people in her facilities weren't visited by doctors or brought to hospitals.

I suggested that perhaps she saw her role as giving people dignity and love as they were dying. At this Farmer pounded his fist on the lunch table and exclaimed for all the restaurant to hear, "But they didn't all have to die!"

In his homily at the canonization, Pope Francis said that Mother Teresa was, in all aspects of her life, "a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available for everyone through her welcome and defense of human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded." He said, "She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity. She made her voice heard

before the powers of this world, so that they might recognize their guilt for the crime—the crimes!—of poverty they created."

I focused again on the banner. I tried not to think of those who were begging in the streets of Rome, who I had to ignore, or step over, on my way to St. Peter's. I tried not to get distracted by the refugee crisis that was occurring throughout Europe at that very hour—including the shores of Italy—as "the least of these" tried to flee one kind of life for the promise of another kind of life and ended up in filthy camps penned in by barbed wire, or at the bottom of the ocean. The waters of the Mediterranean Sea are as littered with the unwanted as are the alleys of Kolkata. I tried not to think about the representatives from governments whose policies were creating this diaspora, who were seated just a few feet from the pope who was exhorting us all to live more like Mother Teresa, and who were even more closely under her banner's gaze.

I tried to think, instead, about the difference Mother Teresa made in the lives of so many, and on the model of compassion and courage she portrayed to the world.

I tried, but I failed.

I turned to the woman next to me—a handbag designer from Manhattan who had worked alongside Mother Teresa when she visited the South Bronx—and said, "If that banner could talk, what would Mother Teresa tell us right now?"

The designer didn't hesitate.

"She'd say, 'What are you doing just sitting here? Why aren't you serving the poor? Why did you go to all of this expense instead of using the money to serve others? Get out of here! Have you learned nothing from me? Go love your neighbor.'"

And yet, there we sat, in the swelter of mid-afternoon, paying our respects to someone who would have been offended by the gesture.

I looked at that banner again and focused on her expression. Smile or grimace?

Both. ■

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego and the annual Writer's Symposium by the Sea. His most recent book is Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion.

Hope is a Healing Act

THE BROKEN MEN of Prague lurch down Petřín hill toward Malá Strana, their hunger as clear as the hollow iron torsos where their bellies used to be. The man leading the march looks whole, more or less, but visitors can see his followers slowly dissolve behind him ... a gash here, a missing arm there, until, at the top of the stairs, only a foot where a whole man used to be.

To capture a human in the process of breaking apart requires attention. It's immediately clear that the sculptor of these Broken Men, Olbram Zoubek, was intimately familiar with the process. Prague's Soviet occupiers also knew something about decay, which the monument commemorates with grim precision—at the feet of the statues is a thin bronze line marking the numbers of Czechs affected by Soviet-era communism: 170,938 forced into exile ... 327 shot trying to escape ... 4,500 dead in prison. But the numbers are but a footnote to the decaying bodies on the hill. The long, grinding erosion of civil society is a personal trauma all its own.

The monument seems out of sorts with its surroundings. To our right is Prague Castle; behind us is

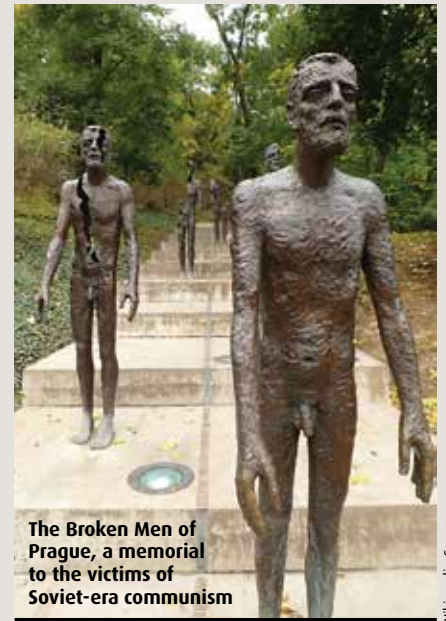
Europe's communism of the 1960s through the '80s was less bloody than its dictators of the 1930s and '40s, but it was equally ruinous. I've come to Prague to consider how our participation in political systems, or our abdication of them, shapes our bodies and spirits.

The Soviet occupation of Prague was a system built to last long after its original perpetrators had moved on. Its success relied on a narrative of inevitability—"this is how things are now"—that separated people from society as they had known it. As journalism, public assembly, and free

exchange of ideas became subjects of state suspicion, civic life became private worlds, drawn smaller and smaller and thoroughly drained of hope.

Milan Kundera, Czech-turned-French novelist and exile from Soviet Czechoslovakia, writes in *Ignorance*: "After the Russian invasion, since they had no inkling of Communism's eventual end, [the Czechs] believed they were inhabiting an infinity, and it was not the pain of their current life but the vacuity of the future that sucked dry their energies, stifled their courage, and made that ... 20-year span so craven, so wretched."

Americans have little appreciation for the mundanities of evil. We'll say we'll be first in line to volunteer as tribute in The Resistance, whatever that means, or deny, passionately, that our current president is anything like European dictators of the past—whatever our position, we assume it is a thrilling one. In the process, we forget to ask the pedestrian questions: What is the work required to participate in upholding our



The Broken Men of Prague, a memorial to the victims of Soviet-era communism

Wikimedia Commons

own civil society in this time? And what has the current administration indicated it will do to those who try?

Correcting our country's course will not be a sexy, sensational fight, however fervently we might dream of it. The revolutionary thing for Americans will be to renounce our own instincts toward individualism that encourage a retreat from civic life—to instead insist on our civic power and our collective vision.

For Kundera, ignorance of what the future held was once an agent of despair for his compatriots, but at another time, equally one of hope: "The Czechs believed that their republic had all of infinity ahead of it. They had it wrong, but precisely because they were wrong, they lived those years in a state of joy that led their arts to flourish as never before."

An accelerating erosion of our civil society is afoot, one that already carries a deep trauma. In these times, hope is a healing act. ■

Catherine Woodiwiss is deputy web editor at Sojourners.

Americans have little appreciation for the mundanities of evil.

the sparkling Vltava with its riverboats, charming ice cream stalls, and tourists flocking over the Charles Bridge for another Pilsner or *trdelník*. The Czech Republic is one of the fastest-growing economies in the European Union, and its capital is regularly named the most beautiful city in the world. Prague, and the world's associations with it, have moved on.

But this monument holds particular curiosity for the American traveler in the summer of 2017.





A close-up photograph of a person's hands and arms, wearing a white t-shirt, reaching into a field of green mint plants. The person appears to be inspecting or tending to the crops. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the field and some other people in the distance.

'Sit Where They Sit'

An "agricultural missionary" on 65 years of sowing seeds to end hunger — five acres at a time • by STEPHEN CARR

MY WIFE AND I left London for Africa in 1952 to serve as "agricultural missionaries" through the Anglican Church Missionary Society. For 65 years we have been living and working with farming families who live off less than five acres of land. In fact, 85 percent of the world's farms are less than five acres.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development estimates that there are some 500 million small farms worldwide, and more than 2 billion people depending largely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Smallholder farmers produce 80 percent of the food consumed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite this achievement many of these farming families are among the poorest people in the world and have the least access to public services. Frequently described as conservative, backward, and ignorant, they in fact survive and produce under conditions in which the vast majority of the world's urban people would be completely at a loss. Their dominant features are resilience and a capacity for hard work.

Innovation and adaptation

Across Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, examples abound of smallholder farmers making major changes to their farming practices in response to new technologies that they recognize as meeting their particular needs. In the early 1950s, on the border between what was then the Sudan and Belgian Congo, farmers were living in a traditional, largely cashless economy with a limited range of

crops. Distances were great and there was no public transportation. Bicycles were greatly desired. Men sometimes traveled 700 miles south as indentured labor for two years in order to obtain a bicycle. This had a disastrous impact on family life in an inhospitable forest environment.

My wife and I moved into a village in this region and became part of the local community as agricultural missionaries. Our neighbors taught us how to survive and feed ourselves. But after a couple of years, we could see how we might improve on the situation. We brought in a half dozen new food crops from other parts of the world and introduced coffee as a cash crop, which did away with the need for men to leave home.

Because we were farming ourselves, we knew the constraints that our neighbors faced and were able to choose options that fit everyone's circumstances. Within a few years the community had adopted a range of new foods, and not only did every man own a bicycle without leaving home but the women had a grinding mill to save them the drudgery of grinding tiny millet seeds on a grindstone for hours on end.

We were then moved to Uganda, where we were asked to serve the agricultural needs of the poorest county in the country. It was an area of high, cool, acid moorland, with soils that were quite unsuitable for food crops, apart from tiny patches in valley bottoms. There was no access road. We walked 16 miles in and out to our home. People there

85 percent
of the world's
farms are less
than five
acres.

A farmer in Malawi inspects his mint crop.

François-Xavier Delmas

were desperately poor, and the children wore goat skins.

Fortunately, there is a crop that thrives on highly acidic soil: tea. We lived in a simple home in the area, learned the local language, and talked to people about the possibility of growing this strange new plant of which most of them had neither seen nor heard.

We helped the first 200 farmers to establish tea gardens. When they knew what to do, we moved on. Today 2,000 families own 6,500 acres of tea in that region. They have borrowed from the bank and built a factory that produces some 50,000 pounds of processed tea per day. Now there are banks, a hospital, and a string of shops in the area.

In the 1980s, I was involved with small-scale irrigation projects in northern Nigeria. For centuries people in this region had used shallow wells and buckets to irrigate small areas of vegetables. We introduced simple methods of making tube wells, derived from India, and brought in small, portable, engine-driven pumps. Twenty thousand pumps were sold for cash in five years. Production increased manifold. With a large urban population growing rapidly every year, the farmers had no problem selling their vegetables to merchants from the cities. The regional economy of the area and its productivity was profoundly changed.

Of course, smallholder farmers making these innovative changes are not confined to one continent. In India, the Bengal famine of the 1940s killed more than 2 million people. With a rapidly growing population, it was predicted that there would be a comparable famine every five years. In reality, there has not been a single one. Farmers were introduced to high-yielding seeds and enhanced plant nutrition. Although the population of India has grown fourfold, the average daily per capita consumption of calories has increased by more than 400, with food produced by 98 million smallholder farming families.

Now, of course, smallholders also face the destruction caused by climate change. While it has yet to significantly impact the moist intertropical zone in which Malawi lies, the best way to “climate proof” crops is to ensure that they are strong, well-fed, and healthy. The main challenge to policymakers in climate-impacted regions is how

to help poor people gain access to the inputs essential to achieve this objective. In drier parts of the continent, reduced rainfall is forcing farmers to adopt lower-yielding but drought-tolerant crops such as bulrush millet, with long-term implications for food availability for a growing population.

Failed projects

Small-scale farmers across the world have made many successful changes over the past 60 years, but I suspect the list of failed projects intended to help them is even longer. I attend meetings with leading academics from agricultural institutions who complain bitterly about “backward” and “ignorant” farmers who are not making use of these academics’ research and proposals.

Why is Africa littered with failed projects and rusting equipment introduced by well-meaning people? All too often it stems from a lack of understanding of the reality of the local situation facing people. For example, a proposal that might increase yields by 50 percent but requires twice as much labor as a family can muster is unlikely to be widely

What may sound reasonable to a well-paid academic is of little interest to people living on less than a dollar a day.

adopted, no matter how technically sound.

While the advertisement “For just \$40 you could purchase this insecticide that would greatly increase your yields” may sound reasonable to a well-paid academic, it’s of little interest to people living on less than a dollar a day. Too often smallholder farmers are approached by outsiders with a “I have come to tell you what would be good for you” message, rather than “Would you share with me your fundamental challenges so that we can see if any knowledge I have might be of use to you?”

The great missionary thinker Max Warren, who headed the Church Missionary Society, pressed upon us the need to “sit where they sit.” Far too many people attempt to improve the lot of smallholder farmers without really knowing where people sit, let



Stephen Carr,
Anglican agricultural missionary

alone taking the time to join them there. If one does not know the questions that farmers are asking, then one’s “answers” are unlikely to satisfy their needs.

At this level there is undoubtedly a role for members of the faith community to provide the sympathy and an in-depth understanding of a community’s challenges by “sitting where they sit” to fully appreciate the limitations they face. Many missionaries and other people of faith have shown such qualities, but this must also be matched with a deep understanding of agricultural and technical issues. If this is not present, then failure may follow. Success is most likely when people who have an in-depth understanding and sympathy with a community join that with a genuine knowledge of agricultural issues.

Why do farming families remain poor?

Hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people live in rural areas and make their living by farming. Over the past 50 years, major efforts have been made to lift people out of poverty, so why are there more rural poor today than half a century ago?

One answer is plot size. If one’s total farm size is two acres and from that plot one both has to feed a family and sell a surplus for cash, then in many cases that surplus will be too small to lift a family out of poverty.

This is the situation of many millions of small-scale farmers. Some of the fortunate few who live in wealthier countries, such as Japan and the United States, can benefit from generous government subsidies.

Change will come from off the farm—by generating work opportunities that offer better returns than smallholder farming, releasing land for more-sustainable plot sizes, and providing an increased and more-profitable market for the producers.

China has successfully lifted large numbers of people out of extreme poverty. The rest of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have been less successful. The challenge increases as the demand declines for an unskilled and poorly educated labor force. Why are people poorly educated? In many countries, it’s proving difficult to provide high-quality services to remote and scattered rural communities.

family photo

Good teachers are reluctant to move to villages with no electricity or running water. The same applies to doctors and nurses.

In my own country of Malawi, it is not just the shortage of staff that affects education and health, but the availability of power. Only 2 percent of rural Malawian families have access to electricity. This denies children the opportunity for reading or studying after 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. all through the year. It also has an obvious impact on the quality of medical services. Hopefully solar power will improve this situation over the next few decades, but so far it has proven difficult to provide at a cost that the poor can afford.

The situation is not helped by the lack of sympathy and understanding that exists among much of the urban population toward the rural poor. This is a challenge to the faith community to take up the case of those who have little voice in policymaking, both in the countries concerned as well as in those wealthy nations that offer development aid. It is not just the volume of aid that matters, but to whom it is directed and how effectively it is managed.

Few Western politicians or policymakers have a detailed knowledge of the needs of the world's rural poor. In my experience, they are prepared to listen to someone who *does* possess that knowledge. With modern technology it is not that difficult to become well-informed on a particular issue in a poor country and so be in a position to put pressure on those making decisions about aid allocation.

One of the great benefits of the Peace Corps has been to spread people with experience of poor rural communities as a leaven throughout U.S. society. Christian vocation can surely extend to such groups and people and not just to service within the boundaries of the church.

The many resilient and hard-working rural families who have been left behind in the economic developments of the past half century deserve more concern from those who, by the good fortune of birth, have prospered over the same period. ■

Stephen Carr was the World Bank's principal agriculturalist covering sub-Saharan Africa until his retirement in 1989. He continues to serve smallholder farmers in Zomba, Malawi.



Groundswell International

Sow Fields, Plant Vineyards

The world's family farmers, with their creative capacity to work sustainably with nature, are showing the way forward.

by **STEVE BRESCIA**

ABOUT A THIRD of the world's population is involved in family farming, working on 500 million smallholder farms. Tragically, of the nearly 800 million people in the world who currently suffer from hunger, the majority are family farmers and food producers in the global South. They often farm under extremely challenging conditions, from the mountainsides of Central America to the African Sahel. What strategies can help them to produce more food and income, in sustainable ways adapted to local conditions?

"Agroecology" is farming using ecological principles. Since the inception of agriculture more than 10,000 years ago, farmers have always been about learning from and innovating *with* nature. Agroecology draws on this wisdom and knowledge, rooted in each place, ecosystem, and culture, combined with modern science. Today, it continues to support farmer-centered innovation to meet evolving conditions. Farmer-centered agroecology fosters human agency, community solidarity, the spreading of knowledge farmer-to-farmer, and the stewardship of the natural resources on which we all depend. Unfortunately, many agricultural policies and programs remain locked in the logic of industrialized agriculture and chemical inputs.

As a global community, we are challenged to overcome hunger, poverty, climate change, and environmental degradation. But the world's family

farmers, and their creative capacity to work productively and sustainably with nature instead of against it, are showing the way forward.

Lankoande Francois is one of those family farmers showing the way. I recently visited his farm in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Like millions in West Africa's Sahel region, his family has faced a crisis of collapsing soil fertility and growing hunger. But Francois showed me how, in four years, his family had regenerated six acres of what had been barren, cement-like land into productive farmland. They experimented with techniques to conserve soil, capture rainwater, integrate trees into their farm, and restore organic matter to soils. He now grows enough food for his family for the year, with a surplus to sell for income. He is also a farmer-to-farmer teacher, part of a local movement spreading these practices to 100 villages.

Francois is creating positive changes where he lives. If we invest in the dignity and creative capacity of hundreds of millions of family farmers like him to innovate with nature and spread practices that work, we can create a global agriculture and food system that is healthier for people and our planet. ■

Steve Brescia is executive director of Groundswell International and editor of Fertile Ground: Scaling Agroecology from the Ground Up (Food First Books, 2017).



By Stephanie Sandberg

Stages of **Dissent**

Theater takes on hard questions in a contentious democracy.

JUST AFTER DONALD TRUMP WAS ELECTED, Vice President Mike Pence went to see the hit Broadway musical “Hamilton,” prompting the cast to read a statement from the stage at curtain call stating that they were “alarmed and anxious” that the new administration would not protect the planet or a diverse citizenry.

This set off a Twitter war between Trump and opponents and posed the American theater community as an entity with a strong voice of dissent against Trump’s administration. POTUS-elect tweeted in reply to the cast’s statement that “the theater must always be a safe and special place” and then demanded that the cast apologize.

But the truth is, the theater created by the ancient Greeks was not a “safe” space but rather a strong space of dissent within democracy. For thousands of years, since plays were first staged at the foot of the Acropolis in the Theatre of Dionysus, the theater has been a place where strong opinions about government and culture are voiced within the liminal space of the stage, where they can be heard by the people so that we might form our own opinions.

The New York theater community has had much to say in recent months, with a slate of new and old plays that have taken on the challenge of being a democratic voice of dissent. One of the freshest is Annie Baker’s new play, “The Antipodes,” which opened at

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Rosalie G. Riegler reviews
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An excerpt from Daniel Hill's
White Awake



Scenes from the new opera
¡Figaro! (90210), above,
and "The Antipodes"



ticking away is that every time the secretary appears to announce what's happening outside, she's wearing a new outfit.

In the end, the writers themselves are left suspended inside their space, with the producer increasingly absent, as though God has left the universe spinning on its own. It's a deeply troubled ending, with no answer, with no story found, and the audience left asking, "So what stories are important these days?" In an interview with Greta Gerwig

in *Interview* magazine just before "The Antipodes" opened, Baker even questions herself on this, saying, "I still feel like I'll never write a play again, because it's so far away and seems so impossible, and I don't know how you begin a play anymore."

Asking "What if?"

In a kick-back to the 18th century, one of the most enduring stories of the stage, Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, is infused with new life in this political moment when immigrant deportation is daily front-page news. Melissa Crespo's staging of Vid Guerrerio's adaptation of the opera, aptly titled *¡Figaro!* (90210), boldly confronts immigration reform and income inequality but with a sense of humor, humanity, and historical context that is sorely missing in today's political climate. "Donald Trump's election and direct targeting of immigrants made the revolutionary message of equality at the heart of *Figaro* seem more urgent than ever," Crespo told *Sojourners* via email, "and I was determined to bring it back to New York to celebrate how diversity is what has always made America great."

¡Figaro! (90210) is set in contemporary Los Angeles. The audience is confronted

Continued on Page 37

New & Noteworthy



From *Love the Sinner*

PIETY'S DARK SIDE

Love the Sinner is a short documentary narrated by queer filmmaker Jessica Devaney, who grew up in a conservative evangelical church. In the wake of the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, she takes a hard look at the connection between Christianity and homophobia. lovetheinnerfilm.com

CRISIS AND CONSCIENCE

Simone Campbell, Kelly Brown Douglas, Jacqueline M. Hildago, George "Tink" Tinker, Kwok Pui-lan, Jim Wallis, and others write about the "confessional crisis" of our political era and possible faithful responses in *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*. Edited by Miguel A. De La Torre. Orbis

A LIFETIME ADVENTURE

Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons explores calling as something we wrestle with not just as young adults but "from infancy to old age," combining social science insights with practical theology. Edited by Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. Eerdmans

HARD-WON WISDOM

John M. Perkins, co-founder of the Christian Community Development Association, has spent decades working for a gospel that is inseparable from racial and economic justice. In the memoir *Dream With Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win*, he reminds us, "It all comes down to love." Baker Books

the Signature Theatre in April as a part of a residency with the company. This is a play about the importance of plots and the absolute centrality of storytelling in human life.

The entirety of this two-hour absurdist play takes place inside a writing room where a seasoned producer named Sandy has assembled a group of writers to come up with "the next great thing." We never find out what this thing is—it could be a movie or a television series or any other type of media. In a motivational speech that opens the play, Sandy claims that stories matter and today they might be the most important parts of our lives within the current darkness. We don't know exactly what Sandy means by this either, but the writers spend the next two hours trying to discover what this story might be. They talk about every type of story from Grimm's fairy tales to primal myths to warped time-traveling fantasies, and the only way we know time is

Commodifying Community?

YOU COULD SAY it's been the best of times and the worst of times for Facebook Inc. This summer the social media platform's number of monthly users reached 2 billion. That's more than one-fourth of the world population, and Facebook has achieved that global reach while still off limits for more than a billion Chinese. More than half of Facebook users log in every day; in the U.S., one out of every five internet page views takes place on Facebook. The company is currently valued at \$435 billion.

This success has come despite what should have been a truly dreadful year for the company's image. Rapes, murders, and suicides have been live-streamed on Facebook. And at least some of those atrocities may have been provoked by the unparalleled opportunity Facebook



went straight from Phillips Exeter to Harvard to Silicon Valley. But it has also fueled speculation that, when he's old enough, Zuckerberg might want to be the United States' next billionaire president.

Whatever his long-term intentions, one immediate result of Zuckerberg's public soul-searching has been a new corporate mission statement unveiled in June. For years Facebook proclaimed that it was all about "making the world more open and connected." This was a value-free statement that assumed openness and connection were unquestionable goods in and of themselves and implied there was something fundamentally wrong with concerns about privacy or autonomy. This Facebook mission reached its logical conclusion in April when we got "connected" to Steve Stephens, the Cleveland who shot a randomly chosen elderly man in the head and "shared" the video with the world.

Facebook's new mission is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." The new buzz words, "community" and "closeness," imply that "connection" is no longer to be for its own sake but for the goal of creating online zones of cooperation and dialogue. Zuckerberg announced the new slogan at a Chicago conference of Facebook group

administrators. These are the unpaid organizers who create genuinely meaningful support groups for such previously isolated people as single fathers or sufferers of rare diseases. They were granted the privilege of paying their own way to Chicago to commune with each other, and with Zuckerberg himself.

Of course, "building community" sounds like a positive direction for Facebook, if in fact there must be a Facebook in the world. But let's remember that "building community" will not cost the corporation anything. The company's software engineers are designing programs to make it easier for users to find "meaningful groups" and for group administrators to manage their functioning. But those staff person-hours will be more than paid for by the ad revenues that all those new group pages (and page views) will generate.

Let's also remember that, no matter how many times Zuckerberg intones his emotive, idealistic-sounding buzz words, we're still talking about an incredibly profitable business whose only product is the zillions of uncompensated hours that 2 billion people spend staring at screens and posting free content. ■

"Building community" will not cost the corporation anything.

offers to sociopaths and exhibitionists. In addition, in the past year Facebook was guilty of helping disseminate false information that helped elect Donald Trump. The social network has also been widely named as a major contributor to our increasingly toxic political culture, in which citizens never have to face facts that might contradict their prejudices. A 2016 study from the University of Pittsburgh even found an association between social media use, including Facebook, and depression among young adults.

As the age of Trump has dawned, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has been devoting a lot of time to polishing his company's image. He's been on a "listening tour" of heartland states aimed at learning more about the lives of his American customers. This is probably a good idea for a 33-year-old who



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel White Boy.

Continued from Page 35

with the story of an impassioned Figaro and his love Susana, who just want to be married and happy like everyone else, but fear deportation as they strive to find a way to stay together. The story is fairly basic: A Count and Countess (representatives of the United States' 1 percent) have lost the passion in their marriage. The Count turns to young Mexican immigrant maid Susana and, when she won't comply, threatens her and her fiancée Figaro with deportation. The young couple outwits the scheming Count. In the end, equality is finally found as the Count and Countess recognize the flaws of their ways and are reinvigorated with a love for one another and for all people. Sure, it's a fantasy, but one that gives a vision of egalitarian politics in a divided world. The bold optimism of this remake testifies that class differences really shouldn't matter and that love can prevail for all people.

While this adaptation of a classic provides a powerful hope, another piece, just as visionary, examines what happened behind the scenes of the Oslo Peace Accords. Commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater, J.T. Rogers' political masterpiece "Oslo" was cultivated through two years of research and interviews with participants in the peace talks. He talked to world leaders, Secret Service agents, and diplomats from every realm, bravely asking, according to artistic director André Bishop, "What if?" Then he deftly assembled these characters in the same room and told their story.

Part documentary, part visionary fiction, "Oslo" shows us what might happen when people come together under extreme and difficult circumstances with the goal of making peace. The play tells the story of the Norwegian couple Terje Rød-Larsen and Mona Juul, who relentlessly worked behind the scenes to bring about President Clinton's Middle East peace plan. They are complicated and difficult characters who are trying to achieve something beyond themselves, something that will last as a testament to deliberative democracy. The play is infused with a sense of humor when it is most needed during the most fraught moments of stressful discussion, and we are introduced to character after character who longs for an end to the troubles of the Middle East. Their worst enemies are history, circumstance, and



From *The Lost City of Z*

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

I GREW UP with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—wildly entertaining, dancing brilliantly with movie craft, speeding up and slowing down in perfect measure, delicious humor and giant thrills aplenty.

But like us all, the filmmakers were subject to the prejudices, pressures, and knowledge of their time. So *Raiders* stereotypes the "Arab street," and its casual approach to violence, while typical of action cinema, is ugly. The joy of the ride makes it easy to ignore that *Raiders* is about a Westerner using Africans to get a Middle Eastern sacred object into an American museum. It may be taking things more seriously than they deserve to even mention this, when the goal was merely a hugely enjoyable Saturday morning serial throwback. The problem with *Raiders* may be only visible in retrospect—it's certainly not a bad film; just a popular one with gaps.

Those same filmmakers went on to produce works such as *Munich* and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *The Big Chill*, and *Quills*, each of which approaches frailty and hope in a humane way. If *Raiders* were made today, who knows what might be different?

It came to mind while watching *The Lost City of Z*, another story about an adventurer seeking exotic treasure. One of the year's best films, it's based on fact—the early 20th century British explorer Percy Fawcett's search for a sophisticated settlement in Amazonia. Like *Raiders*, it looks magnificent and has its share of excitement and memorable

characters. It also explores the inner life of its protagonist and makes some effort to acknowledge the brutality meted out on Indigenous people by outsiders.

In previous work, writer-director James Gray has portrayed outsiders immersed in a world into which they do not fit, but to which they may bring gifts. Thus far his masterpiece is *The Immigrant*, which takes color and drama familiar from *The Godfather* to foreground a feminist tale about overcoming violence without revenge. Gray clearly adores classical, big canvas cinema—and he's also working in a time that encourages investigation of inner complexity and our impact on the lives of others.

He's not the only one—lots of movies and TV shows are thinking about motivation and consequences with a bit more complexity, looking inward, inviting empathy, taking steps toward amends. *Gone with the Wind* has given way to *Twelve Years a Slave*; the anti-communist "Red scare" propaganda of 1950s movies has been replaced by the moral shades of grey in *The Americans*. Questioning the assumption that we all tell stories from the most truthful or liberating perspective is a welcome development. I wonder what future wisdom will grow out of the current moment. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and founder of moviesandmeaning.com and www.irelandretreats.com.

their own fears of failure. They push on and on, until Rogers brings us to the moment when we must ask ourselves, “Is peace possible?” And if so, how?

Today, so many people around the world feel a loss of hope, but this brings what director Bartlett Sher calls in his foreword to the published play “an infinite possibility for the future.” At the end of the play, Rød-Larsen calls out to us, “My friends, do not look at where we *are*; look behind you. There! See how far we have come! If we have come this far, through blood, through fear—hatred—how much *further* can we yet go?”

Conversations that matter

Such dramatic questions create great plays, and this season on Broadway offers a plentiful harvest of them. One is Lucas Hnath’s artful sequel to Henrik Ibsen’s age-old drama “A Doll’s House,” to which Hnath adds the subtitle “Part 2.” In the original—one of the most important modern dramas—Ibsen’s protagonist Nora Helmer chooses to leave

her husband, Torvald, after she sees the utter futility of the institution of her Victorian marriage, where the man has all the power. She goes out, letting the door slam behind her, in search of herself, abandoning husband and children, household, and the semblance of normality. Hnath, whose play “The Christians” was one of the most-produced plays in America in the 2016-17 season, artfully brings Helmer back 15 years later to ask the question, “Did my actions even matter?”

Helmer has conversations with the nursemaid, Anne-Marie, who raised her children; with her daughter, whom she no longer knows; and finally, with Torvald himself. What’s discovered in this darkly humorous twist on Ibsen’s original is that our actions do matter. They leave wreckage behind us if we don’t act carefully. Helmer is revealed as a somewhat self-serving hero who brought about a symbolic act of equality for women but who hurt many people in the process. The play asks us to ask ourselves, “How do we act in justified protest

and keep the world intact?”

Perhaps that is *the* question all of us should be asking ourselves these days, and the New York theater scene of 2017, in the democratic spirit of theater’s origins, has helped us do so. While Broadway theater is not accessible to all people, it does influence cultural conversation across the country, through the many policy makers and mass media creators who do see it. These plays all compassionately, with humor and drama, allow the country to see itself. More folks need to have access to these works of dramatic art so that the cultural conversation can truly be egalitarian. We don’t need the theater to apologize, we need it to expand. ■

Stephanie Sandberg is an assistant professor of theater and film Studies at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va. Her most recent work is Stories in Blue: A Pilgrimage to Heal Human Trafficking, which follows the stories of six survivors of sex-trafficking.

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Reviewed by Rosalie G. Riegler

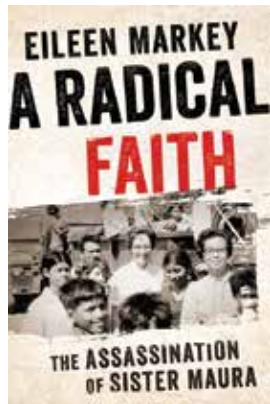
SOLIDARITY AND SACRIFICE

A Radical Faith: The Assassination of Sister Maura, by Eileen Markey. Nation Books.

EILEEN MARKEY'S story of the life of Sister Maura Clarke reads like a Greek tragedy, progressing inexorably toward darkness. Many of us know the ending: In 1980, four churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador by national guardsmen, led by a sergeant who had been trained at the U.S.-based School of the Americas. The men raped and executed two Maryknoll sisters—Maura Clarke and Ita Ford—Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel, and lay woman Jean Donovan, ambushing them on their way back to the people they served in Chalatenango.

Clarke is the last of the four women to be memorialized with her own book, but Markey has created the most complete work. Her beautifully sourced research ranges from family to Maryknoll archives to conversations with many people who worked with the sisters in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The churchwomen's stories are even more important now, as the 2016 repeal of El Salvador's Amnesty Law could allow the prosecution of Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, the former director of the Salvadoran national guard. This means someone in top leadership could finally be brought to justice for this and thousands of



other massacres.

We learn about the killing in the beginning of the book, with the remaining pages concentrating on Clarke's life and the anguished uprisings and brutal repressions in Central America during the 1970s and '80s. Throughout, it's a story of Clarke's radical faith, but also her radical love: for her family, for the Brooklyn students she taught in her first assignment, and,

above all, for the poor of Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The story, in Markey's hands, is enthralling. She vividly brings to life Clarke's childhood in a loving Irish immigrant family with deep roots in the IRA, her novitiate years in a pre-Vatican II convent where silence and discipline reigned, and her first foreign assignment, in 1959, to the impoverished families of Siuna, Nicaragua, whose fathers mined gold for a Canadian company.

Soon Vatican II sends waves of change through the Roman Catholic Church. In 1967, the Maryknoll sisters shed their long woolen habits and are encouraged to move from serving lay people to empowering them. Clarke's first response is to listen and learn; because she genuinely loves people, she excels as a home visitor.

These were the Cold War years, with "godless communism" declared the evil threat and U.S. foreign policy, in league with every dictator in Central and South America, the unquestioned savior. We see Clarke learn with awful clarity that her country is on the wrong side and responsible for much of the misery she is helpless to alleviate or assuage, beyond offering warm eyes and a listening heart. As Clarke grows in knowledge and in love for the people of Nicaragua, she is moved to act, and we are drawn to the chilling final chapters.

Clarke opens the hearts of those she visits to the Bible's good news in their own language and a liberation theology that promises hope in the formation of Christian base communities. Working in Managua, Nicaragua, from 1970 to 1976, she sees firsthand the staggering corruption of Anastasio Somoza DeBayle's dictatorship, the devastation of the 1972 earthquake, and the difficulties of forming community among thousands of earthquake refugees. Yet she persisted, as we say.

It is in Managua that Clarke's love becomes truly radical: She empowers students and then blesses them when they leave for the hills and the Sandinistas. She doesn't want them to kill or be killed but she justifies their decisions with tenets of just war theory and Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which preaches, according to Markey, that "after long struggle against insurmountable injustice, armed rebellion could be moral."

After 17 years in Nicaragua, Clarke is obligated to spend three years in the U.S. There she conducts workshops for college and parish groups on the worsening situation in Central America. In 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero asks Maryknoll to send more sisters to El Salvador. Clarke accepts the challenge and thus her own death. Truly, she learns the Dostoevsky maxim so beloved by Dorothy Day: Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing. ■

Rosalie G. Riegler is an oral historian with two books on the Catholic Worker and two on nonviolent resisters to U.S. war and militarism.

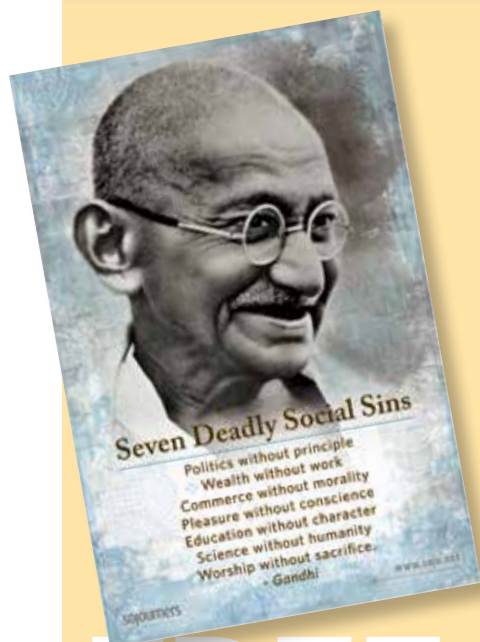
Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.

Love in Action



Just Call Me Jerzy: Popieluszko in the United States and Canada, a book by Judith Kelly, details the life of a Polish priest who accompanies the people as they struggle for freedom from the communists, speaks bravely to thousands in Poland and Canada, and is martyred by the Polish secret police. A nonviolent priest of the people, Popieluszko's life demonstrates love in action. justcallmejerzy.com

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CultureWatch

BOOKS ART MUSIC FILM

Reviewed by Abby Olcese

FINDING GOD IN THE DARK

Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings, by Josh Larsen. IVP Books.

AS A TEENAGER growing up in a church setting that discouraged engaging with movies, books, or music deemed a “bad influence,” I remember frequently being confused about pop culture, particularly when it came to what films I was “allowed” to watch. Was I wrong for wanting to see *Taxi Driver*? For identifying with *Saved*? Was it a sin to watch *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

The answer to all these questions, of course, is “no,” but the sentiment behind them is understandable. The easiest metric for Christians to judge a film’s quality is the measure of its “objectionable” content, regardless of what that content says about the filmmaker’s intent, or the political or cultural attitudes under which it was conceived. The truth, however, is that all art—whether spiritual or secular in origin—has something to express about the world: joy in its beauty, anger at its injustice, a whole spectrum of emotions and ideas that reflect the human experience.

Blessedly, this is something that the new book *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* understands well. Author and film critic Josh Larsen regularly works with both faith-based audiences, as an editor for the online faith and culture magazine *Think Christian*, and secular ones, as the co-host of the radio show and podcast *Filmspotting*. This balance of experience, and Larsen’s willingness to see the value in movies of nearly every stripe, helps *Movies Are Prayers* function in two ways. The book works as a resource to expand faith-based readers’ understanding of cinema and also to help spiritually curious movie fans relate to faith through film.

Larsen organizes the book by topic, discussing movies that function as expressions of praise, lament, yearning, anger, obedience, and meditation, among other subjects. Each chapter is dedicated equally to scripture, theology, and film theory, exploring each theme in terms of emotional response, scriptural example, and its representation in cinematic art. Larsen’s examples cover contemporary,

classic, mainstream, and art-house films with equal passion, giving readers easily identifiable film moments to relate to while also suggesting great next steps for a deeper dive.

While the book doesn’t ignore films with directly spiritual themes, Larsen is more interested in exploring movies with secular roots that speak to shared values, connecting them to spiritual life in ways you might not expect. It’s easy, for example, to find godly motifs in a film such as Terrence Malick’s

The Tree of Life or the Danish movie *Babette’s Feast*. Amy Schumer’s raunchy 2015 comedy *Trainwreck*, however, poses a slightly greater challenge. Yet Larsen covers them all—along with *Chinatown*, *Star Wars*, and yes, even *Taxi Driver*—with compassion and insight.

For Christians wary of watching violent or inappropriate films, this approach provides an opportunity

to engage with sometimes-difficult art in a way that neither scolds the viewer’s curiosity nor condemns the movie’s content—moving past knee-jerk reactions and seeing the ways in which art connects us. For readers with no spiritual background, but a love of film, Larsen’s writing potentially opens doors to a new way of viewing, relating the spiritual to the everyday and revealing the spark of the divine in the flicker of the movie projector.

Movies Are Prayers is a solid encapsulation of the changing tides in faith-based cultural criticism right now, reflecting a desire for engagement over isolation. It eloquently expresses the deep emotional associations that, for some of us, make both the church and the movie house sacred spaces, recognizing that sometimes popular culture expresses our deepest feelings better than we can ourselves. I wish this book had been around years ago—maybe then I wouldn’t have taken so long to watch *The Last Temptation of Christ*. ■

Abby Olcese (@indieabby88) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.



To Be White and Christian

TO BE BOTH a white Christian and a white American is to be caught between two warring factions. We may not like this, and we often struggle to acknowledge the depth of the conflict, but both of these identity sources remain at war as they vie for supremacy in our lives.

To be born white in America is to be instantly thrust into this war. Robin DiAngelo effectively demonstrates some of the ways that the ideology of white supremacy is designed to have immediate impact on our emerging sense of identity:

Think about it like this: From the time I opened my eyes, I have been told that as a white person, I am superior to people of color ... We are born into a racial hierarchy, and every interaction with media and culture confirms it—our sense that, at a fundamental level, we are superior. And the thing is, it feels good. Even though it contradicts our most basic principles and values. So we know it, but we can never admit it. ... We have set the world up to preserve that internal sense of superiority and also resist challenges to it.

Becoming a Christian who is also white should mean rejecting the ideology of white superiority. Our allegiance to Jesus should enable us to recognize that this ideology is antithetical to the Bible, as is any system, ideology, or narrative that attempts to position one group of people as superior. The gospel should instead position us to draw our identity from a different source.

The thrust of this book is to strengthen our ability to live from our identity in Christ while rejecting the ideology of white superiority. So how do we manage the disorientation that comes with the internal

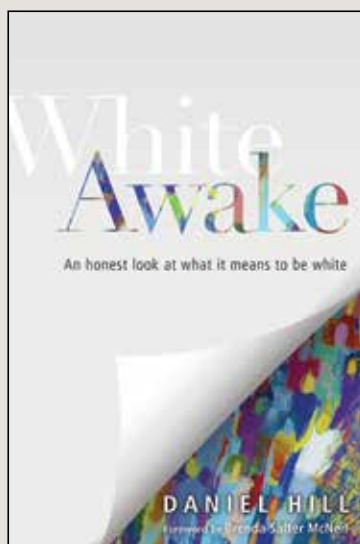
civil war sparked by this struggle? In the same way that it would be naïve for new Christians to presume that conversion comprehensively and immediately removes sin from their lives, so it is naïve to assume that conversion keeps us from drawing our sense of identity from the ideology of white superiority. A good way to think of it is that conversion gives us the *ability to begin* divesting ourselves from the grips of white superiority.

The transformation of sight is often a painful process, just as all true growth is. As we move

**From the time I opened my eyes,
I have been told that as a white person,
I am superior to people of color ...**

toward the brilliance of the light, we discover how much darkness was in us at each stage. This is a disorienting and confusing process, and if we don't lean into the grace of God, we are tempted to depart from the journey of transformation. Therefore, one of the most important things to remember is that, despite the disorientation that comes with a crisis of identity, it's a gift to be embraced. Each time we discover a new manifestation of white superiority that's informing our identity, we can courageously admit it, confess

it, and replace it with the words of God. We remember that we have been identified by God and named as the beloved. We remember that we have been baptized into both the death and the resurrection of Christ. We remember that we are new creations, sent into God's world as ambassadors of reconciliation. ■



*From White Awake by Daniel Hill.
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Keystone: The Fight Continues

OF ALL THE unlikely battles still to be raging, the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline has to be about the unlikely.

It was a long shot in the summer of 2011, when the national fight really began. Though a hardy corps of ranchers in Nebraska were already battling, and though Indigenous activists in Canada had been spreading the word about its source in the tar sands, it was all but unknown on a national basis.

Combine that with the fact that the oil industry had never lost a fight over some infrastructure it wished to build, and it was reasonable to conclude opponents had no chance. Indeed, more than 90 percent of the “energy insiders” polled that summer by D.C.’s trade paper, *National Journal*, said TransCanada would soon have its permit. There was a bipartisan consensus in favor of such projects: The secretary of state (that would be Hillary) had said she was “inclined” to grant the border-crossing approval, and President Barack Obama had already allowed



Bold Nebraska's Jane KleeB

Eric Gregory/Lincoln Journal Star

construction would begin.

Well, said the oilman, that kind of depends on Nebraska. You see, it turns out that along with the federal permit, the company also needs the Cornhusker State to approve a route—and that means they have to go through the seasoned and unflappable activists at Bold Nebraska, whose leader, Jane KleeB, is among the toughest organizers in the country. And it’s not just Nebraska—in South Dakota, Indigenous groups are girding for the fight, just as at Standing Rock.

And people are bringing a new tactic to the fight, too. All along the route, people are building solar arrays and wind turbines and other renewable energy technology, which TransCanada would have to tear down to build its pipe. It’s a way of reminding everyone how much the world has changed over the six years of this battle: The price of solar power has fallen 70 percent, among other things.

In a rational world, that would make anyone wary of building a pipeline designed

to be used (and paid off) over half a century. No one can seriously think it will seem like a good idea in 2070 to still be pumping filthy tar sands oil to be refined on the Gulf Coast and then stuck in the gas tank of someone’s car—long before 2070 those cars are going to be running on electrons. I’ve just come back from a sojourn in Africa watching the rapid expansion of solar energy—one would think that if it is possible in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire, it is possible in Nebraska and South Dakota as well.

Even if Trump and TransCanada succeed and KXL gets built, the fight has been well worth it—it helped launch an era of opposition to every fossil-fuel infrastructure project, and many of those battles have already been won. But Keystone *isn’t* built yet: The fight, improbable from the start, improbably continues. ■

Bill McKibben is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College in Vermont and founder of 350.org.



When will construction begin? Well, that depends on Nebraska.

the first-generation Keystone pipeline to be built.

But more people went to jail about XL than about any political issue in a long time, and then for years people kept up a steady drumbeat—loud enough that, eventually, after four years of hemming and hawing, Obama caved and blocked the project.

THAT VICTORY, of course, disappeared with the election of Donald Trump, who made approving Keystone one of his first priorities. But as he scrawled his name, he asked the head of TransCanada, there for the ceremony, when

Patmos

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream.

—The Pilgrim's Progress

I stand at the edge of these sharded cliffs
Time and the sea have splintered away
From this rotten stump of island,
Fit only for felons and the likes of me.
The glorious ocean spreads out of sight,
Moving, moving, with no signs of life.
But, beneath the calm I know there lies
An empire old as the birth of time,
A kingdom swollen with citizenry:
Jellyfish, groupers, turtles, rays,
Serpents splitting the currents like grass,
Sharks and the fearsome leviathan.
Freedom? You can't get there from here.
But from where I stand I could leap out,
Crash through blue mist coiling the shore,

Mesh with the pebbles that constitute
The thread of beach strung out below,
And wait for Jesus to remember me.
On the other hand, I could just crawl
Back into my cave, do my best to ignore
The lost years charcoaled on the walls
And the stench of human occupation,
Lie down, stretch out, fold my hands
Behind my head, and close my eyes,
My last thoughts being, before sleep:
If the deep blue holds such mystery,
What must the secrets of heaven be?

Troy D. Reeves taught English literature for 36 years. He lives in Nixa, Mo.

Curb Your Imperial Impulse

MANY OF THE VOICES in this month's readings seem to have "no filter." They say what they think without adjusting it for politeness or theological correctness. In so doing, biblical paragons are presented as identifiably human, and God is seen as a God who welcomes our unvarnished truth. Here the raw human emotion acknowledges the complex terrain that is the human heart. The texts assume we feel, hurt, and occasionally want revenge; that we transgress and fear revenge; that we want forgiveness for ourselves but not necessarily for others. We can feel that God had gotten the better of us. Our experiences of God can be frustrating and painful. Like Jeremiah and Jonah here and Hagar (Genesis 16:7-14; 21:15-19) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:9-11) elsewhere, these texts invite us to tell God about God and take our frustrations to God.

The scriptures call us to interpret them with regard to their ancient contexts and our contemporary ones. Israel/Judah, in any of its configurations, was one of the smallest and least powerful nations in its world. The scriptures were compiled and received their last edit when what was left of Israel was completely subjugated by a foreign power. That is not our contemporary situation as Americans. We may have been conditioned to read from the position of Israel, but we also need to read from the position of empires that subjugate. If God can bear us without filters, surely we can scrutinize our own imperial impulses.



Wil Gafney is an associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.

[SEPTEMBER 3]

Come See About Us

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

IT'S NATURAL to want those who hurt us to be hurt in return. Jeremiah and Paul take an unflinching look at anger, then present a number of responses. Jeremiah wants God to zap his tormentors ("Bring down retribution for me on my persecutors," in 15:15). To the Romans, Paul counsels a different kind of prayer: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (12:14). And again, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil ..." (verse 17). And then, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves ... 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay ...'" (verse 19).

For me, Paul's counsel is aspirational and Jeremiah's prayer keeps it real. From a theological perspective, God knows our circumstances and our needs. Experientially, it's helpful to be able to ask God to come see about us. Jeremiah illustrates this, saying, "Holy One, you know" and "remember me and visit me" (15:15). Jeremiah also reflects honestly on his experience of and with God, using language that might shock the pious.

Jeremiah tells God that she is "like a

deceitful brook; like waters that fail" (15:18). In other words, God's waters look smooth, clear, and inviting, but when Jeremiah steps in, he is nearly swept away on purpose by God's roughness. Jeremiah's language is strong; the word translated as "deceitful" means "liar." This is not the first time that Jeremiah has given God a piece of his mind.

Earlier Jeremiah accused God of deceiving her people (4:10). Later, he charges God with enticing—literally seducing—him, and with overpowering him, using a combination of words that often signal sexual assault in the Hebrew Bible (20:7). These examples of extreme rhetoric illustrate Jeremiah's deep emotional honesty in his prayers with God.

In our own time when extreme rhetoric predominates in traditional and social media spaces, and in political discourse, it may appear unseemly for a venerated prophet to speak to God the way Jeremiah does. But Jeremiah knows God can bear our strongest emotions. We cannot harm that relationship by telling the truth about how we feel.

[SEPTEMBER 10]

A Sacred Call

Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

"STAY WOKE!" is a warning cry to keep one's eyes open to the systems that deal death and dehumanize the living and the dead. The cry emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement and has spread to other protest spaces. Paul's words "You know what time it is ... it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Romans 13:11) are a biblical forerunner of this rallying cry. For Paul, time was running out. Christ's return was imminent, but it has not yet happened.

Perhaps now is the moment to wake from dreaming about Jesus coming back—there is nothing we can do to influence, speed, or delay his coming—and wake to those things over which we actually have power: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:9b-10). It is such a simple litmus test for our words and deeds, personally and collectively. It should go without saying that hurtful words and actions can't be explained away as love. Yet there are far too many Christians who use "love" as cover to do or say anything they want to someone else.

The Black Lives Matter movement seeks the preservation *and flourishing* of black life in the face of public extrajudicial killings—often recorded—of black women, men, and children. That reality that black life is sacred and black life is imperiled yields the prophetic cry: #BlackLivesMatter. Like Ezekiel, many of those who are a part of and allied with this movement have a sacred calling to cry out to and against those who deal death, dehumanize, and demean. Some, like Ezekiel, understand that heeding the prophetic cry is for the benefit of the oppressor and the oppressed alike (Ezekiel 33:8-9).

And for those who opine that some folk get what they have coming to them: Even when God, the impartial judge, deems someone to be wicked, she takes no pleasure in that death (Ezekiel 33:11). The prophetic cry seeks the preservation and flourishing of life as an act of love on behalf of God and the one that cries out for her.

[SEPTEMBER 17]

Forgiveness is a Gift

Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13;
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

FORGIVE! It doesn't really work as a demand. Forgiveness is a gift, to oneself and to the one who offends. Forgiveness is hard; sometimes it is aspirational. In Genesis, the brothers who planned to kill Joseph and instead sold him into slavery now lie and say their father asked Joseph to forgive them (50:15-17). Their lie frames the demand as a request, but a request from beyond the grave placed on a dying man's lips is hardly a request.

I have noticed increased societal pressure for victims, particularly of heinous crimes, to forgive those who have terrorized them or murdered their dear ones. Alternately, the vigorous affirmation of those who are able to express forgiveness immediately almost seems to shame those who cannot or do not. Notable examples include the families of the members of Mother Emmanuel AME Church murdered by a white supremacist and the families of victims of the Boston Marathon bombers.

Pressure to forgive is even more inappropriate when it comes from the one who inflicted the wound. The most egregious form of this is religious pressure on a person to forgive; that is an additional act of violence. As it happens in the text, Joseph is able to forgive his brothers. He has healed during the years he was apart from his family. Some folk need time to heal; that doesn't make them less faithful.

Markers of privilege—white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, conforming to dominant-culture beauty standards, class standing—are often used by those who hold them to apply religious and ethical pressure on the people they injure, even pressure to forgive. But, as in the case of Joseph and his brothers, there is no contrition and the consequences of their injury is ignored. The calls by white Christians for racial reconciliation often remind me of the insistence for forgiveness by Joseph's brothers, without repentance or reparations.

Joseph's brothers prepare for vengeance, saying, "We are here as your slaves." They sold him into slavery and can expect no better in return. Forgiveness is a gift.

[SEPTEMBER 24]

Jonah's Sermon

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8;
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

I KNEW IT! *I knew you were a God who was merciful and gracious to people I don't think deserve it—and I am furious with it and you.* That's Jonah in a nutshell (Jonah 4:2). Or rather his sermon. I read the book as a sermon with an over-the-top illustration not to be taken literally. I find Jonah to be an intentionally sulky comic character. The ridiculousness of Jonah highlights the absurdity of the claim that God does not care about the Ninevites or other non-Israelites (though other texts will elevate Israel and demonize the Ninevites, as in the book of Nahum).

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, responsible for the decimation of Israel and destruction of the Northern Monarchy. The barbarity of the Assyrians included skinning people and carving out hunks of flesh while they were alive. Asserting God cares for Ninevites (even livestock, according to Jonah 4:11) would have been a radical proclamation. It remains so for many in our time. Jonah's geographical context—today's Iraq and Syria—identifies peoples for whom many have felt enmity in recent years. They are also recipients of God's love, care, grace, and mercy: the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, al Qaeda, ISIS. Of them, as well, God asks: "And should I not be concerned about them and all the people and animals who live in their cities?" The answer now is what it was then: "Yes, of course." God cares for, reaches out to, accepts, and welcomes those we hold in enmity and those who harm us.

If the book of Jonah is a sermon, then its text is Exodus 34:6, where God identifies as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"—virtually identical to the text in Jonah 4:2. These characteristics of God come to be known as the definitive divine attributes in Judaism. God's love is abundant, even to those we find to be unworthy of it. ■

"Living the Word" reflections for October can be found at sojo.net/magazine. "Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.



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Appearances Can Be Deceiving

AS A CHRISTIAN social justice magazine, *Sojourners* maintains very high standards. We take seriously our prophetic role of holding political leaders accountable, but we also adhere to important social norms when calling out an individual. We would never consider commenting on a person's physical appearance, such as the fact that Jeff Sessions is too short for his ears. No, we take the high road. It's what's inside that counts, and we would never stoop so low as to denigrate someone's dress or demeanor. That would be wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

However.

Is it just me, or have you noticed that Ivanka Trump and her husband seem to be possessed by aliens?

In photographs taken before the election they appear happy, spontaneous, and completely at ease with



Ken Davis

in the same, measured voice we hold suspect when adult members of our species emit words completely detached from reality. Ivanka claimed her father was “vindicated” by the blistering testimony of former FBI director—and platinum member of Big and Tall Stores—James Comey. Only an alien unfamiliar with human norms would think that being called a liar in a televised hearing looks good on your résumé. Not to mention Jared's emotionless face, which conveys no awareness of the Russian cloud billowing at his feet.

They appear to be possessed by a being not quite used to its new human forms. I'm familiar with that look. I know the signs, because I've seen it in lots of movies. (Some people say I watch too many movies. But I say you can't watch too many, although you only need to see *Love Actually* once. After that, it's like adding whipped cream to s'mores. Your teeth start to hurt.)

I ADMIT THE cinematic fuel for my imagination sometimes leads me down a path of paranoia and fear. When my cellphone screen recently went dark without warning, my first reaction was to see if people around me were having the same problem. With an instant sense of foreboding, I expected everyone on the street to be looking down at their nonfunctioning phones, as car engines stopped

spontaneously and traffic came to a standstill. And I expected the ever-present Jehovah's Witnesses on the corner to start shouting “*This is it! We warned you! So what do you think of our magazine NOW!?*” (We still have copies.)”

At that moment, one of only two explanations seemed possible: Aliens were sending us a message that our technology had finally reached the point of threatening their own distant way of life, and they were now approaching our solar system bent on our imminent destruction. That, or I needed to reboot my iPhone.

If it's the former, then our only recourse would be to defend our Earth against an invading force, despite the odds, bravely going into battle, facing certain death after a painful and bloody ...

... Okay, maybe not that. On second thought, it might be better to begin composing the precise wording of our surrender. You want to get the phrasing just right, you know, not too pushy. (When dealing with a superior race, it's important to set the proper tone.)

And if Ivanka and Jared *are* under the influence of aliens, her father may want to get some distance from them. Donald Trump could be the first politician to leave public life to spend less time with his family. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

But we should still pay attention.

their life of obscene wealth and unconscionable luxury. They looked like real people. Maybe not the real people you'd see at Trader Joe's, but pretty normal.

But look at them now. Their well-known physical beauty is almost *too* perfect, their skin a porcelain rigidity unmarred by the usual strains of life (even the rich have their struggles, such as the boorish demands of nannies to take the weekend off). Their smiles are frozen and emotionless, their faces uncreased by laugh lines, their voices without inflection. It's as if their bodies are hosts to creatures whose study of human behavior was limited to a vintage-doll catalogue. (If they'd studied an L.L. Bean catalog, they could have imitated more normal-looking people, albeit insufferably cheerful and well-equipped for any outdoor activity.)

Regardless of venue or circumstance, Ivanka and Jared speak



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—Luke 6:47-48 (NLT)

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*<http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/> and <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>

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